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Muslim converts as a heuristic device for postsecular thinking: agonism as an alternative approach

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Abstract
The public resurgence of religious adherence in the West remains one of the defining qualities of this century. If secularisation theory can be understood to articulate the inevitable secularisation of post-enlightenment European societies, religious converts may be understood to epitomise some of the theory's failings. Through a narrative-ethnographic investigation into the identity configurations and educational experiences of fifteen millennial (born between 1981 and 1996) Muslim converts, my doctoral research indicates that these converts tend to construct deeply religious identities, characterised by scriptural literalism. Set within the backdrop of an educational context that some perceive as increasingly censorious, these convert Muslims provide a heuristic device with which to examine the contested public spaces in which religious subjectivity can be expressed. This paper will bring literature challenging the securitisation agenda in education, into conversation with theories resistant to the impulse to seek consensus in social and educational debate. Advocating for more agonistic approaches to education, I will present examples from my data that warn of the ways in which 'hardened' secular and liberal biases may contribute towards an unmooring of the pluralistic endeavour. Located within contemporary debates about the importance of religion as a discursive aspect of modernity, the chilling of free speech and the place of transgressive thought, the paper encourages an expansion of opportunities to disagree.

Keywords British Muslim converts · Conversion to Islam · Secularism · Agonism · Postsecularism · Liberal theory · Deliberative democracy · Education

1 Introduction

The public resurgence of religious adherence has become one of the defining qualities of late modernity in the West (Berg-Sørensen, 2013; Casanova, 1994). While the more strident secularists such as Dawkins, Hitchens, Dennett and their ilk would have us think of religion as a discursive element of public life to be a thing consigned to the annals of history, contemporary diversities in religious conviction, which are being articulated within

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the public spaces of seemingly secular societies, would indicate otherwise. Though it can hardly be denied that institutionalised religion, as a whole, has suffered under the secularisation of modernity (Berger, 1996), studies demonstrate that conversion to Islam, for example, in Western Europe has thrived (Jawad, 2013; Sealy, 2021a). The paradox of this phenomenon in the face of apparent socio-political disincentive (Ogan, et al, 2014; Spoliar & van den Brandt, 2021) and the aforementioned body of literature which predicted an inexorable secularisation of Western civilisation (Berger, 1969; Bruce, 1995, 1996, 2002; Wilson, 1976) are instructive of the continued need to theorise about the public role of religion in modern societies. This is especially important for our understanding of the place of religion in education.

As some liberal theories respond to the growth (or, perhaps, a newfound cognisance) of more 'furious' forms of religious conviction (Berger, 1999, p. 2), there has been a tendency to stress the impartiality and rationality of liberal values such as deliberative democratic reasoning (Bohman & Richardson, 2009; Camicia & Franklin, 2011; Talisse, 2005), which frames politics and morality as a kind of aggregative process of learning (Biesta, 2011); an alternative, it is often implied, to the rigidity and irrationality of faith-based reasoning. This deliberative reasoning, it is suggested, leads to the acceptance and consensual implementation of secular liberal values in public institutions such as schooling (Biesta, 2011; Fraser-Burgess, 2012). However, these constructions of a hard dichotomy between rationality and religion are, Connolly (2005, pp. 4–5) has argued, unstable and constitute a sweeping bias; a bias that is often left uncontested (Gillin, 2021, p. 12). Far from being neutral, therefore, this type of liberal secular deliberative approach, is, as Taylor (1994, p. 62) might put it, 'a fighting Creed'. Or, as Pettit (2005, p. 157) might phrase it, 'a political ontology'.

If that is accepted, then the 'creed' of secular liberalism must be openly acknowledged and, by extension, contested. This starting point renders the competing values of any number of worldviews, ontologies and religions as operating on an equal epistemic footing. That is to say, the implication of this theoretical parity is thus: this form of liberal secular rationality, in its illusion of neutrality, becomes unqualified to act as arbiter in the contestations about which worldviews, ontologies and religions gain recognition and influence within pluralistic society's public square. There is, it follows, a need to consider other theories in the discourse surrounding the role of religion in public life. This paper emerges in response to that consideration. By drawing upon a narrative-ethnographic study, which investigates the conversion narratives, identity configurations and educational experiences of fifteen millennial British Muslim converts, I will seek to illustrate some of the ways in which an unquestioned acceptance of secular, liberal practices in the public setting of education may lead to the marginalisation and disenfranchisement of some religious subjects. I tentatively advocate for the adoption of more agonistic conceptions of pluralism which, I will argue, imply a postsecular orientation.

1.1 Structure of the paper

The points I have raised above run along three currents of thought, which will form the basis of this paper. The first current establishes convert Muslims as a heuristic device with which to highlight and interrogate the biases embedded in academic conceptualisations of religious conversion, which stem, primarily, from secular theorisations. In highlighting the case of convert Muslims in Britain, I am also seeking to unsettle the impulse to elide Muslims' religious and ethno-cultural identifications; a noted limitation in some contemporary

liberal theory (Panjwani, 2017; Sealy, 2018). The second current of this paper will examine the implications of converts' subjectivities in public life, examining the experiences of convert Muslims within the specific public realm of education. Here I will present selected findings from a narrative-ethnographic study. This will lead to the third current of the paper wherein I will tentatively advocate for more agonistic approaches to educational pluralism, as a potential alternative to contemporary deliberative approaches (Mouffe, 1999). Before proceeding, however, it seems germane to disambiguate my deployment of some of the terminology that I have used in this introduction, and that will continue to undergird the arguments I make moving forward.

1.1.1 Agonism

Agonism refers to the postmodern political theory which encourages contention and conflict in politics, recognising it as a natural and constitutive part of democracy. For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), conflictual politics acts as the lifeblood of democratic society and a challenge to hegemony. Acknowledging the fact that agonism is not monolithic, the version of agonism sketched in this paper draws from the political theories of Mouffe (1993, 1999, 2005, 2013) and Connelly (1993, 2005). Mouffe's conceptions of an agonistic society relies upon an acceptance of the supremacy of democracy and its principles of liberty and equality. Importantly for my discussion, however, her theory retains an allowance for dispute about what those principles might mean. What Connolly's agonistic principles add to my discussion is a more accommodating view of faith in negotiating the borders of pluralism and political recognition in the public realm. A detailed delineation of various agonistic approaches is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the elements of agonism that are key to the arguments I will present in this paper include the theory's impulse to cultivate—and not be averse to—conflict, and its acceptance that no consensus can be sought in the socio-political sphere.

1.1.2 Postsecularism

Here also, I must stress that a detailed account of postsecular theory is not the focus of this paper. Postsecularism has taken on a variety of meanings in the literature (Beckford, 2012), including as an epochal descriptor. Primarily, however, my use of the term in this paper will refer to postsecularism as a theoretical transcending of the secularisation theory and the over-enfranchisement of secular ways of knowing. I am interested in the implications of postsecularism for the treatment of religion in public political life. Particularly, I am interested in convert Muslims' demands for accommodation within education and the treatment of those demands as troublesome or anomalous.

1.1.3 Secular(ism/ist)

My deployment of the term secularism in this paper borrows from the definition sketched in *Contesting Secularism* (Berg-Sørensen, 2013). It is to be understood as referring to 'secularism in the plural'; as the political doctrine which advocates a separation between religion and politics in public reason and institutions; as the theoretical perspective that regulates the relationship between religion and politics; as a strategic use of the power of those theories in politics (p. 3). Habermas' (2008) distinction between 'secular', as referring to the ideologically agnostic stance towards the validity of another's theological claims, and

'secularist', as referring to the polemical stance against religious doctrine and publicly articulated religion, is relevant also.

2 Theorising conversion to Islam in the West

If secularisation theory can be understood to articulate the inevitable secularisation of post-enlightenment European societies, then the rapid growth of religious converts may be seen to epitomise a kind of 'desecularisation' of contemporary society. Surprisingly, however, little work exists on theoretical models of conversion to Islam in the West (notable exceptions include, for example, Al-Qwidi, 2002; Köse et al., 2000; Rambo, 1999; Roald, 2012). Many of the earlier (pre-9/11) works on the topic of conversion to Islam in the West were concerned with *da'wah* (proselytizing) (e.g. Poston, 1992), historical perspectives (e.g. Bulliet, 1983) and attitudes and identity (e.g. Adnan, 1999). Later works on the topic of conversion to Islam in the West have tended to focus on issues such as gender (e.g. Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017), terrorism (e.g. Flower, 2013), media portrayals (e.g. Sealy, 2017), identity (e.g. Sealy, 2019a, 2019b; Younis & Hassan, 2017), racialisation and Islamophobia (e.g. Moosavi, 2014), or amalgamations of the above (e.g. Sealy, 2021a, 2021b; Spoliar & van den Brandt, 2021; Bunzl, 2005; Van Nieuwkerk, 2006a; Jawad, 2013; Suleiman, 2013, 2016). The sparse work in the area of theoretical models of conversion to Islam in the West may be the result of the limited conceptualisations of conversion, which are based mainly upon psychological and sociological theory. Rambo (1999) problematises these conceptualisations, noting that, almost without exception, conversion theory is built upon the works of people of American and Western European ethno-cultural heritage. These theories, he contends, reflect an understanding of selfhood, family life and social norms that differ from Islamic notions of these things (p. 263). He suggests that such theories may be ill-equipped to explain conversion to Islam. Buckser and Glazier's (2003) anthropological anthology on the topic of conversion exemplifies this point. In spite of its detailed attempt to consider conversion in both Western and non-Western terms and across a range of religions, the multiple ethnographic case studies presented in the book lack any thoughtful treatment of conversion to Islam. In that regard, Rambo notes:

> Research on conversion should include more serious studies of Islamic conversion. Especially since September 11, 2001, it is imperative that Islam be better understood and recognized as a force exerting a powerful political, cultural, and religious influence around the world… In the study of Islamic conversion, care must be taken to see the phenomenon with new eyes. Christian-based categories must be set aside, at least temporarily, so that the nature and scope of conversion to Islam can be examined without preconception or bias. (p. 197)

While this statement can be understood, straightforwardly, to be describing 'Christian-based… preconception or bias', Smith's (2008, p. 2) characterisation of secularism as 'Christian ethics shorn of its doctrine' may justify a reinterpretation of Rambo's words as a critique of secular biases in examining conversion to Islam.

2.1 Conceptualising converts

There has been a tendency, among scholars, to construed British convert Muslims within secular paradigms (Adebolajo, 2022, p. 400), or as a type of countercultural reaction to

the 'existential vacuum' (Frankl, 2006, p. 106) left by twentieth and twenty-first century patterns of modernisation. An important contributor to this interpretation is Köse (1996, 1999), whose study of seventy British converts to Islam suggests that the social conditions created by institutionalised religion's apparent inability to adapt to secularisation may be relevant in understanding the surging uptake of Islamic conversion in Britain and beyond. In his 1999 article, Köse supports his argument with statistics related to the decline in church attendance and scholarly opinions about the 'less institutionalized nature of Islam' (p. 302). His work describes Muslim converts as experiencing, prior to conversion, a process of detachment and subsequent rejection of the oversecularisation of society. He points to the perceived tendencies of Christian churches to capitulate to the impositions of modernity, giving way to contradictions between religious doctrines and the practices of the church and its devotees. In summary, Köse's study indicates that converts undergo a cognitive restructuring in which they conclude that Islam fulfils their desire for a confluence between religious principles and practices. Köse's explanation is evocative of socio-psychological theories of conversion, which point towards individuals requiring direction in their lives through the structure and meaning systems that religion provides (Jung, 2001; Luckmann, 1967; Spilka et al., 2003). Köse's study reaches the conclusion that conversion to Islam in Britain is the result of cognitive processes and the need for converts to associate with a community that is 'less willing to restrict religion to the level of individual consciousness' (p. 310).

Shanneik (2011) arrives at a similar conclusion, detailing the experiences of twenty-one Irish female converts to Islam in the 1980s. She introduces the view that many converts are attracted to a culture that runs 'counter to what is dominant in their society' (p. 506). She describes an attraction, within her convert participants, to various models of counterculture, even prior to their conversions to Islam, implying that this attraction and the desire to 'break with their former lives' (p. 508) led to participation in any number other alternative scenes, one of which, she theorises, was Salafi Islam. According to Shanneik, the convert participants simply regarded Islam 'as another form of counterculture which… acts as an identity to express difference' (p. 514). Strikingly, she uses what might reasonably be considered pejorative language to describe converts' religious practices and identification with Salafism. For example, Shanneik refers to scriptural literalism as 'blind acceptance' and designates converts' reliance on Islamic scholarship as 'unquestionably follow[ing]' Salafi authorities. In addition, rather than accepting the converts' own interpretations of their conversion, the author questions whether or not their conversion and Islamic identities 'really' express a break from their past religion (p. 514).

Gebauer and de Araújo (2016) suggest that Islam, for many black converts, is seen as a contribution to the transnational counterculture against racism and other forms of marginalisation within post-colonial societies. Citing the role and influence of modern luminaries such as Malcom X within the counterculture and anticolonialism movement in black communities, the authors theorise that convert Muslims are sometimes motivated by 'critical engagement with the history of Christianity and its interrelations with European colonialism and racial subordination' in their decision to convert. The study's construction of a 'Muslim blackness' (p. 31) that stands in opposition to the perceived 'whiteness' of 'European colonialist Christianity', along with the study's insistence upon a racialised understanding of the 'increasing conversions to Islam among people who identify themselves with blackness as a counterculture' (p. 32), appears to reinforce an unhelpful conflation of religion and ethnicity. This stands in contrast to more nuanced efforts to understand convert identity, which have challenged essentialised and racialised portrayals conversion. To my mind, Gebauer and de Araújo's study seeks, inorganically, to situate religious conversion

within the intersection between cultural blackness and Islam, much in the same way that the aforementioned studies seek to situate conversion within the fields of secular psychology and sociology. The result is an acute attenuation of the religious content of conversion.

The theme of counterculture and cultural resistance as a way to understand conversion to Islam features prominently in the literature (Chaudary, 2020; Flower, 2013; McGinty, 2007). The inattention to the religious content of conversion within this literature speaks to a propensity to disbelieve the less secular reasonings given for conversion, within conversion narratives. In questioning the authenticity and self-identified motivations of the Muslims' conversion narratives, the above theorisations deny the converts' ability to self-represent, evoking Said's (1978) description of orientalist positionalities:

> references to Islam's incapacity for self-representation, self-understanding, self-consciousness…is perhaps the most familiar of Orientalism's themes - since the Orientals cannot represent themselves, they must therefore be represented by others who know more about Islam than Islam knows about itself. (p. 95–97).

This outlook is also discernible within theorisations about female conversion to Islam in the Western context. The literature in this regard often contains a telling overemphasis on affectional motivations for conversion, leading to essentialisations about Muslim women (Van Nieuwkerk, 2006b; 2006c; Ahmed, 2010; Shomer, 2015) and presuppositions of emotional reasoning. This represents a dismissal of female converts' capacity to rationalise (Spoliar & van den Brandt, 2021; Rambo, 1999, p. 261).

2.2 Converts in contemporary British media and policy

The failure of these conceptualisations to take seriously the ontological outlooks of converts reflects a much broader secularity embedded within some models of liberal theory. In relation to the liberal theory operative in Britain in the form of multiculturalism, Levey and Modood have pointed to a propensity to depoliticise religion and perceive faith-based demands in the public sphere as problematic (Levey & Modood, 2009). This perception was brought into sharp relief in the post-9/11 era, in the form of media portrayals of converts and in educational policy.

There now exists a substantial amount of literature highlighting the negative portrayal of Muslim converts and Islam in the media (see Said, 1997; West & Lloyd, 2017; Spoliar & van den Brandt, 2021). In his 2017 article, *Making the "Other" from "Us": The Representation of British Converts to Islam in Mainstream British Newspapers*, Sealy (2017) argues that the British media's portrayal of Islam falls within the epistemological legacy of orientalism. He posits that with the media representing the principal source of cultural knowledge in Britain, the British mainstream media plays a large role in characterising Islam in an oppositional binary with the secular, liberal ideals of Britain. Sealy's paper demonstrates the ways in which contemporary media reproduces orientalist and Islamophobic tropes in relation to convert Muslims. He offers the results of a discourse analysis in which 191 newspaper articles between 2008 and 2015 were sampled. His analysis reveals a clear focus on the words 'terror', 'terrorism' and 'terrorist' when reporting on convert Muslims (p. 198). These findings correlate with Brice's (2011) report which found that newspaper stories commonly linked convert Muslims to terrorism, violence and criminality. Similar studies indicate that portrayals of female converts to Islam are frequently intertwined with gendered, culturalised narratives (van Nieuwkerk, 2006c; Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017; Sealy, 2017), as well as many of the

same discursive narratives present in media reporting on convert men. Significantly, there is evidence to suggest that these negative associations manifest in public attitudes (Ipsos Mori, 2018). These theoretical positions on Islam manifest in policy also. While there is a slew of policies that can be examined in that regard, particularly within the post-9/11 securitisation policy milieu, considering my focus on the field of education, I will delimit my discussion to the Prevent and Fundamental British Values (FBV) initiatives, which are particularly relevant to the data I will present in this paper.

The Prevent policy was a strategy aimed at halting the spread of extremism in the UK (HM Government, 2011). Established in 2006, with a wide remit that included supporting communities in the 'development and promotion of shared values' (Revell, 2012: 79), the policy was initiated through an array of toolkits directed at educational institutions (including schools, colleges and universities). Early criticisms of the policy argued that, not only did it fail in preventing violent extremism that existed outside of the Muslim community, but it also contributed to the stigmatisation of Islamic theological beliefs and alienated Muslim communities (Kundnani, 2009; Liberty, 2010; Revell, 2012, pp. 82 & 83). In spite of revisions in 2011 (Home Office, 2011), Prevent continued to target areas of the country with higher Muslim populations (Shain, 2013, p. 75). As an auxiliary to the Prevent Strategy, the Home Office's Educate Against Hate (2023b) website is designed 'to provide practical advice, support and resources to protect children from extremism and radicalisation'. Under the section entitled 'What are the warning signs of radicalisation', the website lists 'converting to a new religion' as one of the 'behaviours… intended as a guide to help you identify possible radicalisation…' (Educate Against Hate, 2023a). The reference to conversion as a 'sign of radicalisation' was tacitly confirmed to be referencing conversion to Islam by former Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities, Nicky Morgan (Channel 4 News, 2016). This type of government sanctioned association between conversion and radicalisation is further evidenced in the 2011 review of Prevent which states, 'people who convert may initially be less well-informed about their faith, they may be vulnerable to overtures from radicalisers who seek to impress a distorted version of theology upon them' (Home Office, 2011, p. 87). The subtle presentation of Muslim converts as impressionable, ill-informed and prone to extremism relates closely to the secularist ideological distinction between liberalism as rational and faith as irrational. It raises important questions about the implications of such understandings, and the effects of this upon the way Islam is taught and the educational experiences of those who convert to Islam.

Further to this, the introduction of FBV into the new Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2012) ushered in a 'hardened' notion of Britishness that raises more questions. By formalising the requirement for all teachers in England and Wales to avoid undermining, and actively promote the 'fundamental British values' of 'democracy; the rule of law; individual liberty; and mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith' (DfE, 2012, 2014), the 2012 policy standardised and validated a form of national consensus that may be used as a powerful exclusionary tool (Lander, 2019; Revell & Bryan, 2018). According to Hoque (2015, p. 23), the policy constructs a narrative in which Islamic values are seen to be 'incompatible' with British values. This narrative is constructed, it would seem, by the assumption that a consensus on the foundations of British national identity can ever be reached in public discourse. Agonsim's theoretical aversion to consensus seeking in the public sphere is helpful in exposing the theoretical undergirding of such policies as doctrinaire. My examination of the educational experiences of a group of Muslim converts provides insight into the effects of that doctrinairism.

3 Field work

This paper is based upon a narrative-ethnography (Tedlock, 1991) investigating the conversion narratives, identity configurations and educational experiences of fifteen millennial-born British Muslim converts. Participants were delimited to those who had converted to Islam during their secondary or post-secondary education in Britain, post-9/11. The self-selecting sample was recruited through an online open call which was disseminated to various contacts and convert networks throughout the country. The narrative element of the study involved the collection of narrative interviews in which the participants described the motivations and circumstances of, and leading up to, their conversions. The ethnographic element of the research involved periods of digital and/or physical observation in cafes, homes, prayer spaces, social media platforms, *da'wah* stalls and educational institutions. This was followed by semi-structured interviews which lasted between one and two hours. Both narrative and semi-structured interviews were transcribed, uploaded to Nvivo 12, and the entire corpus was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I began this analysis by engaging in what Braun and Clarke (2021) describe as 'familiarisation' (p. 331); spending a significant period of time reading, re-reading, transcribing, annotating and thoroughly exploring the data gathered throughout the research process. After this initial stage of immersion into my data, I began to formulate initial codes and early themes, 'carving out pieces of narrative evidence… to border [my]… arguments' (Fine, 1994, p. 22). As common and related codes emerged, each of the codes were taxonomised and further collated into related categories. Codes and categories were revisited throughout the analysis process, with their relevance, relationships and consistency under continuous review. Themes were constructed around closely related elements of the data which I had coded and identified as recurring and/or of analytical significance within the participants' narratives, and ethnographic reports. Thus, throughout the analysis, 'themes' referred to consistencies and patterns within and between data which appeared relevant to the RQs that guided the study. Themes were not understood as quantifiable measurements of a code or topic's prevalence across the data.

The sample included eight female participants and seven male participants, loosely reflecting the extrapolated gender distribution of convert Muslims in Britain (Brice, 2011; Sealy, 2019a, 2019b; Zebiri, 2008). I was unable to replicate the reported distribution in relation to ethnicity, however. Given the fact that a participant sample of fifteen cannot hope to be representative of the larger convert community, and taking account of the dearth of accurate data on the demographic makeup of converts, it is hoped that the diversity of ethnicities represented within the sample will offer insight into the experiences of a range of British converts. Participants self-identified as Asian (1), Black (3), White (7) and mixed race (4).[1] Participants' ages ranged from 26 to 42. Eight of the fifteen participants had previous religious affiliations, including Christian (Catholic, Protestant and Jehovah's Witness), Jewish and Hindu. The remaining seven identified as either atheist, agnostic or none. In the interest of avoiding an imposition of researcher power, participants chose their own anonymising pseudonyms. It is to be noted that I asserted a critical Islamic epistemological stance throughout this research,

[1] The capitalisation of 'White, Black and Asian' here is in accordance with Appiah's (2020) recommendation to capitalise the words in order to draw attention to the socio-historical origins of these terms as a social, rather than a natural or biological, identity classification. She notes that 'The point of the capital letter, then…[is] to situate' (Appiah, 2020).

in an effort to both uphold my own authentic epistemological positionality and in order to foreground the theological perspectives of the religious converts within the study. This epistemological posture is elucidated in greater depth in a prior publication (see Adebolajo, 2022).

In what follows I present and then discuss a series of extracts that I have selected to illustrate the presence of three themes: (1) Identity: Post-ethnic, Anti-culturalist and Scripturally Literalist; (2) Marginality in Educational Settings; (3) Transgressive Views and Self-Silencing. The development of these themes establishes convert Muslims as a heuristic device with which to interrogate the secular biases embedded in liberal deliberative approaches and imply a need for postsecular modes of accommodating religion in the public space of educational institutions.

3.1 Theme 1: Identity: post-ethnic, anti-culturalist and scripturally literalist

I begin by noting that my study corroborates the nascent body of literature exploring convert Muslim sociality and religiosity in contemporary Britain, which has suggested that religion is commonly the super-ordinate identity marker for convert Muslims (Sealy, 2022). This is perhaps unsurprising given the homogenising factor of religious conversion in the lives of these participants. In response to the question 'Do you consider yourself as having an identity? (What is it/why)', all fifteen participants answered emphatically with some variation of 'my identity is Muslim'. The converts also tended to adopt a post-ethnic, anti-culturalist and scripturally literalist form of religiosity, from which their demands for recognition within the public space of education came. These findings bring into relief the fact that many in Britain are not becoming straightforwardly secular in the ways predicted by theories of secularisation. These findings further imply a need for postsecular thinking in understanding Muslim converts social demands. Isa, 34, for example, noted:

> They did these culture days [in university], where they would have different foods – curries and stuff. But why not do a halal day, where they actually cater for Muslims who need halal food? I had to go off campus to eat. Culture isn't important to practicing Muslims. Halal food is. Do you see what I mean? If they really want to cater for more people… for Muslims, have halal food, not just a curry. (Isa, 34)

This extract exemplifies the feelings of resentment participants expressed towards the conflation of culture with Islam, particularly when cultural considerations took precedence over religious considerations. As the extract to follow highlights, participants contrasted their literalist understanding with cultural understandings and found that their literalist stances sometimes created perceptions of extremism.

> The Quran says, *salah* [prayer] is at specific times [recites Qur'anic verse in Arabic]. So, I would not miss it for exams… or a lesson or anything… [therefore] you pretty much get seen as though you're taking the religion too far. Alhamdulillah, it was my history teacher again who… let people know that it wasn't just a cultural thing for me, that it was about my religion and that I took it seriously. (Uthman, 30)

In Uthman's case, having converted at age fourteen, an understanding teacher helped him to navigate his way through the later part of his secondary schooling. For other participants, their adherence to an Islamic scriptural literalism, which they perceived to be free of cultural accretion, created experiences of marginality within their educational settings.

3.2 Theme 2: Marginality in educational settings

Participants' religious perspectives and feelings of marginality had a significant impact on their educational journeys. For Emma, it led to a discontinuation of her education.

> I'm all for education, but I dropped out of uni myself. I'm basically a pretty religious Muslim chick in a *niqab*. I don't shake hands with men, and I don't really free-mix.[2] I don't drink. I don't smoke and I'm pretty sure most of my views about gender and stuff don't fit in to uni life. It just ain't the place for me… On top of that… I'm a white revert[3] and it's just not that easy to get heard when you're talking about, erm, Islam and Muslims and stuff, if you're not Asian. (Emma, 42)

Emma's comments reveal a perception that the university system itself was deeply at odds with her religious sensibilities. Along these lines, one participant commented:

> I don't know if I would say the whole experience [of getting a degree] was worth it in the end… But yes, it is a thoroughly non-Muslim… experience… loads of compromises… I would probably advise my own kids to study distance learning. (Owen, 27)

A large majority of participants describe the educational environment after their conversions as inhospitable, with varying consequences. Notably, Umm Musa decided to change her mode of study, rather than forgo her education due to the difficulties she faced. However, those changes did delay her education, affect her attainment and reorient her career aspirations.

> It took me a long time to find the interest [in education] again. My parents wanted it, and I did a bit. But I couldn't be myself as a Muslim, like properly… So eventually I did online A-Levels… You're left to it, on your own really... But it allowed me to get married, have kids and just practice the *deen* [religion] how I wanted to. (Umm Musa, 31)

Some participants spoke of the 'exhausting' psychological effect of their marginality.

> It was super exhausting, yes… Although I was sticking to my guns, I did become less confident... it took a lot, mentally. Other kids would see me as like a priest or call me Jesus, because of my *thobe* [long Arabian garment]. The college didn't care, when I complained, *subhanAllah* [Allah be glorified]. (Aleem, 26)

The extracts presented in this section offer insight into the view of those who considered the university campus to be a prohibitive environment for religious identity. Emma touches upon the notion that her ethno-cultural variance with the wider Muslim community means that her religious concerns could be dismissed, resulting in her choice to leave. This form of managing of expectations mirrors what Islam et al. (2019), refer to as 'satisfied settling', a process 'in which (Muslim) students have justified (unconsciously) not having access to a richer and more fulfilled university experience in relation to religious needs' (p. 94).

[2] This vernacular is a translation of the word *ikhtilat*, referring to inappropriate social interaction between men and women.

[3] Revert is another word for convert. It is used to denote the Islamic belief that one who converts to Islam is returning to the natural state of submission to Allah, upon which one is born.

3.3 Theme 3: Transgressive views and self-silencing

For the fifteen participants of this study, 'settling' frequently meant avoiding student activism, self-silencing of views inside and outside of the classroom and the performance of apoliticism. In particular, the converts chose not to express views which could be misconstrued as extreme or considered controversial or transgressive. Many instances of self-silencing and avoidance of student activism related closely to views and topics which participants felt fell afoul of the Prevent agenda.

> I remember going to anarchist and communist [university] society meetings to help organise protests for *Filasteen* [Palestine]… I didn't look like a Muslim so, I could kind of go a bit under the radar… if you were coming at it from a non-religious, anti-war angle, it was cool… But I knew brothers… who were… harassed by anti-terror for getting involved in stuff like that. (Derrick, 38)

By ensuring his Muslim identity could 'go under the radar' Derrick felt able to express his political emotion while avoiding suspicion from anti-terror policy. Interestingly, the converts also spoke about views which didn't relate to anti-terror legislation, but which they felt also demonstrated the incapacity of educational spaces to accommodate their religious views.

> They say you can talk about things, but you can't really. There was literally nowhere to even debate the topic of LGBTQ or foreign policy or anything. If you're Muslim… it's put up or shut up, when it comes to that stuff. Like I said, my own family saw me as a weird because of what I thought about what was happening in Palestine. Trust me, in school or whatever, in education, it was a no-go area. (Abdullah, 35)

This data highlights how, for some converts, the limits of free speech created a culture in which educational settings were sites of censorship. In instances where there was a clear power differential, some participants even chose to compromise their religious practice.

> When I was there [on a vocational training course], if I didn't shake the assessor's hand, I was seen as a problem… they see it like 'you don't understand your religion'… like I had been radicalised. So most of the times, even if it was a woman, I would just shake their hand. (Yusuf, 39)

Further to this, there was evidence of concern among my participants that their political views and religious practices were perceived as too socially transgressive to be acceptable within their respective secular educational institutions. This resulted in a lack of opportunity to debate. In some cases, it led to an inability to reveal their religious subjectivity in public.

> Probably nobody I know had a clue what I thought. I just pretended… as though Islam and politics are completely separate, and I had no political opinion… even what I wore was like not what I wanted to wear or wear now... Looking back it was so people didn't think I was extreme… But subhanAllah, it isn't worth it, for what people think. Your *eman* [faith] is more important. (Leanne, 37)

Leanne's description of being performative of an apolitical stance during her FE education had ramifications well after finishing her studies. During my ethnographic

observation period with this participant, she revealed that she now found it too difficult to publicly practice her religion fully, fearing that she would appear too fundamentalist. This experience of spiritual aporia between practice and belief gave further context to Leanne's claim that 'it isn't worth it'.

4 Discussion

For a portion of the converts in this study, continuing their education within the disciplinary remit of policies such as Prevent and FBV and the cultural impositions of secularism represented a kind of pyrrhic victory. While in most cases participants were able to complete their education, this sometimes meant delaying or changing their educational plans, being performative in their religious practice, stifling their political views and enduring inhospitable educational environments. Emma's comments are particularly illustrative of the perception that their educational environments were at odds with their religious subjectivities. This resonates with Andersson et al.'s (2012) suggestion that university campuses are now often 'mediated through commercial interests' which have a propensity to 'promote hedonistic cultures associated with sex and drinking' (p. 505 and 507). It is conceivable that within such contexts, student who are not 'normative', defined by Andersson et al. (2012, p. 512) as 'white, middle class secular students', may emerge as 'other'. For some, this type of alterity resulted in struggles that continued beyond their education. For others, it inspired the decision, later in life, to home-school their children or advocate alternative modes of study.

These vignettes provide a glimpse into the experiences of marginalisation and tension faced by converts within the edifice of Britain's secular liberal education. On the whole, they perceive their religious subjectivity to be highly scrutinised, their needs unduly dismissed and their identities enclosed within the ethno-cultural considerations of the wider Muslim community. Derrick's comments, especially, appear to indicate a latent appreciation, on the part of some students, of the 'hegemonic power of secularism in British political culture' (Modood, 2013, p. 77) and the spill of that culture into the sphere of education. This serves to underscore an incapacity within Britain's educational institutions to recognise the validity of social demands made by a distinctly faith-based group such as converts, who fit uncomfortably within the ethno-racial and ethno-cultural diversity and inclusion discourse. In that sense, convert Muslims act as a heuristic device with which to probe secular biases and imply a need for more postsecular thinking in achieving inclusion. It is my ongoing scepticism of contemporary liberal deliberative practices in education that lead me to reflect on the theory of agonism as a potential alternative.

As mentioned previously, agonism is a broad socio-political stance whose various permutations and implications fall beyond the scope of this paper. It is not my intention here, therefore, to grapple with questions about the limits of pluralism and the place of religious fundamentalism in democratic society. In bringing agonism into conversation with what I have discussed so far, I have a focused interest in the theory's acceptance of conflict and its impulse to avoid consensus. This sensibility, I contend, offers a theoretical resource for navigating the sorts of tensions I have outlined. For example, the perception expressed by some of the participants that the fixed cultural realities of their schools, colleges or universities were at odds with their literalist religious values, indicates a desire for more accommodating views of faith, which are present in Connolly's notion of agonism. He posits:

> Even fundamentalists… can participate in such relations of complementary dissonance, to the extent, first, they acknowledge how their own faith appears contestable and offensive in some respects from other points of view, and to the degree, second, they affirm restrictions in the ways they press their demands in light of this first awareness. (Connolly, 1993, p. 29)

The data highlights how, for some converts, the limits of free speech created a culture in which educational settings were sites of censorship. Applied within the context of education, I believe that Mouffe's agonistic model (1993), which recognises social relations and the structure of collective identities as inherently antagonistic, and welcomes that as part of the pluralistic endeavour, may offer practical resources for tackling contemporary issues around censorship and the 'chilling of speech'. Agonistic theory might be applied to, for instance, pedagogical practices like classroom debate in order to cultivate freedoms of expression in the classroom, acceptance of disagreement and expanded conversation between oppositional viewpoints. Importantly for my own area of research, agonistic educational practices may empower converts to feel able to express religious, transgressive, controversial and/or political sentiment within student representation systems (e.g. Student Unions) as well as debate societies and classrooms. Research into the application of such practices might be undertaken to explore how this type of plurivocality in practice may redress the marginality of those who, like some of my participants, may otherwise choose to alter or discontinue their education, unwilling to compromise their identities.

While contemporary deliberative pedagogical approaches have sought to regulate communication and debate in the classroom in pursuit of what Englund (Englund, 2016, p. 62) refers to as 'collective will formation', agonistic approaches would interrogate this intent by insisting on conflict. This may have the potential to disrupt what some of the participants recognised as a secular hegemony in Britain's educational culture. Agonism's comfortability with conflict and non-consensus, applied in the classroom, I argue, would simulate a more realistic social state within pluralistic societies and thus provide a more functional pedagogical approach for citizens. After all, 'One of the first steps on the civic journey is the education system. Education should help young people become active citizens once they understand their role within society…' (House of Lords, 2018, p. 27). Put simply, I propose more open debates around ideas such as identity, nationalism, religion, geopolitics and sexuality, without an expectation of consensus. The research I have presented here indicates that some religious subjects would benefit from a 'deeper pluralism' and a greater freedom to disagree.

5 Conclusion

> who defines what is and what is not 'reasonable'? In politics the very distinction between 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' is already the drawing of a frontier; it has a political character and is always the expression of a given hegemony. (Mouffe, 1993, pp. 142-3.).

Agonism alerts us to the notion that there can be no claim to neutrality on the part of liberal theories. The secular creed of liberal deliberative democracy, which is in operation in Britain, has cultivated the notion that faith-based reasoning is often an inherent 'Conversation-stopper' (Rorty, 1994). Such a perspective, necessarily, discounts faith-based demands for accommodation in the public realm as 'politically exceptional, culturally unreasonable

or theologically alien' (Modood, 2013, p. 69). I have drawn on literature in the fields of sociology, religion and education to explicate how this outlook manifests within the media and within policy, and in particular, how that applies to convert Muslims. This paper has illustrated how those same outlooks effect the educational experiences of British Muslim converts. Namely, leading to feelings of marginalisation and social and political exclusion, which, in turn, result in less enriching educational experiences and, in some cases, the decision to discontinue education.

In maintaining a theoretical scepticism regarding secular liberal practices, I have advocated for a postsecular orientation in the treatment of religion in education. I have suggested that agonism may provide theoretical resources to guide this postsecular turn within the limits of Britain's pluralism. One of the key implications of my small-scale doctoral research and the theoretical findings it has yielded is a need for further research on the practical application of agonistic educational practices, both within the classroom and in other areas of the educational structure.

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