

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC JOURNEY TO *SALAFISM*

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In the name of Allāh, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

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This article highlights some of my motivations for conducting a study on women's conversion to Salafism in a modern-day context. In doing so, it introduces my own voice to the research process and gives the reader a greater insight into my positionality as a female researcher researching Salafi women from a community to which she belongs. Further, apart from making a strong and positive contribution to a subject that is difficult to grasp from the outside in, this first-hand account also offers innovative research which locates, and maps Salafi centres situated around the United Kingdom. This, it is hoped, will aid in the prevention of any future inaccuracies in the production of knowledge that aims to situate narratives of Salafism within the wider debate about New Religious Movements in the modern world—especially those which equate Salafism with violent and non-violent extremism.

The impetus for researching female conversion to an Orthodox interpretation of Islam stemmed from my own personal experience as a second-generation Pakistani woman of Muslim heritage who became Salafi nearly 30 years ago. In doing so, I hoped that rather than form a mere collection of 'general impressions',¹ my story would act not only as a springboard for understanding some of the social processes that contribute to changes in social behaviour and commitment to a 'new' religious group, but would also add to the objectivity and methodological empiricism that is absolutely crucial for a study that seeks to take a scientific approach to the study of religion. As researchers Roberts and Yamane argue in defence of their own positionalities as religiously active persons, 'objectivity does not mean that the sociologist claims to be above error or to have the total truth ... objectivity means that the sociologist tries to prevent personal beliefs, values, or other biases from affecting the study'.²

As in other areas of study in sociology, those who choose to study religion often do so out of their personal interest in the subject ... [and] are no different from feminists who study gender in society, Marxists who study class inequality, second-generation Americans who study immigration, or African Americans who study race relations ... these personal connections to one's subject matter are not problematic in themselves.³

As mentioned in an earlier article, namely, *The Emergence of Salafism in the UK* (2022),⁴ I too met with the Salafi Da'wah as an upwardly mobile young South Asian female university student in the early to mid-nineties. My quest for a more meaningful existence reached a pinnacle when my otherwise seemingly successful educational career failed to resolve an identity-crisis which was fuelled by the pressures of growing up as the eldest daughter in an affluent middle-class, yet very culturally patriarchal and patrilineal family setting in the multi-

¹ Roberts and Yamane 2017:27-29.

² Ibid.: 28.

³ Ibid.: 28,29.

⁴ See author's (2022) article, *The Emergence of Salafism in the UK* for a history of contemporary Salafism in the UK. Source: researchingsalafism.com.

racial/cultural city of Oxford in the 1980s.⁵ However, unbeknown to me at the time was that my own search for and acceptance of Salafism occurred during the post-Cold War era, which, it is argued, had caused a shift towards a politics centred on identity, and ‘paved the way for the rise and legitimisation of religious fundamentalist and other absolutist movements’.⁶ Davie (2007) explains that two defining moments occurred near the end of the 20th century that prompted more people to turn to religion: the first was the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which ‘brought religion centre stage in a particularly dramatic way’, and ‘the second, precisely ten years later’, was the demise of Communism caused by the end of the Cold War, which gave ‘way to a politics centred on identity (or identities) within which religion finds a natural place’.⁷ According to theorists of religion, these two events are often perceived as historical markers deemed largely responsible for the decline in secular confidence that was so dominant in the 1960s, but also for having immense implications for the sociology of religion in general.⁸ As Bonnefoy (2011) states in her research on contemporary Salafism in Yemen:

The resurgence of religious actors, which few social scientists had anticipated, takes many different shapes and has become a privileged way of contesting both internally and internationally existing political order. It reshapes individual loyalties, often diverting them from the state and plays a central role in the emergence of new actors, that may not necessarily be powerful, but that have emerged as major disruptors of the contemporary post-Cold War world order.⁹

Equipped with increasing knowledge of what constitutes authentic Islam, my continuing journey in the year of my marriage in 1998 entailed that I move from my home-city of Oxford where I was the only known Salafi, to the heart of one of Birmingham’s most impoverished inner-city areas—Alum Rock. Consequently, upon entering my marital home in early 1998, I found myself in the middle of Salafi Publications’ (SalafiPubs) ‘headquarters’, the place where all the ‘typing, emailing, copying of audiotapes and photocopying of articles, etc’,¹ took place, which was essentially the ‘back room’ of my humble new dwelling. Although the sizable Salafi community in Birmingham is now considered by many to be the hub of contemporary Salafi Da’wa in the West, in the mid-90s there were relatively few Salafis in the whole country let alone Birmingham, and indeed some even recall a time when the number of Salafis in the city of Birmingham could be counted on one’s hands.

However, before long the number of Salafis in the UK began to increase nationwide, and emboldened by the newly founded Salafi Publications,¹⁰ many felt it was an appropriate time for the Salafi Da’wah to be ‘openly propagated without a need to feel shy of the title’.¹¹ Hence,

⁵ In a patriarchal culture reminiscent of rural Pakistan an abnormally high degree of importance is placed on sons, mainly because of the security (especially financial) they will potentially provide to parents in their old age. The constraints upon females within a patrilineal system where the transfer of property is from father to son range from daughters not being afforded the right to ‘choose’ a suitable marriage partner or receive their rights of inheritance. See Wilson (2006).

⁶ Yuval-Davis 2011:132.

⁷ Sacks 2002, cited in Davie 2007:7.

⁸ Davie 2007:7.

⁹ Bonnefoy 2011:21.

¹⁰ See author’s (2022) article, *The Emergence of Salafism in the UK* for a history of contemporary Salafism in the UK. Source: researchingsalafism.com.

¹¹ May 1996: OASIS & Salafi Publications—Spreading Salafi Da’wah’, by Abu Khadeejah Abdul-Wahid, accessed 1st September 2020.

those convinced by the clarity of Salafism's call began to overcome their reluctance in being overtly labelled 'Salafi', not least because of the term's synonymity with extremism. Consequently, those converted to the idea of living as closely as possible to their newly discovered Salafi lifestyle began to flock to Birmingham. The steady influx of Salafis only added to Birmingham's rich history of migration and settlement¹² causing it to become a haven for those seeking to practise 'authentic' Islam in relative ease—a phenomenon captured by Bowen (2014) in the title of her book, *Medina in Birmingham and Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam*.¹³

For many Salafis like myself, this move (internal migration) was not without its hardships, especially if it meant downward social mobility and a less improved lifestyle. However, the gradual benefits derived from the emotional and nurturing spaces of belonging meant an escape from the deprivation that many often experienced when away from an established community of Salafi believers.¹⁴ One of the most striking things I observed as a member of this community over the years was that it was not just women from backgrounds similar to my own who had chosen to give up their previous lifestyles in favour an orthodox and rigorous version of Islam, nor were they confined to a unique community in Birmingham. Rather, while accompanying my husband—who was invited to speak at various international Salafi conferences—and whilst performing Hajj with other Salafis from around the world, I discovered that there were similar segregated communities of Salafi converts, consisting of both men and women, young and old, educated and professionals, uneducated and unemployed, migrants and indigenous, of all different races and nationalities, scattered across some of the major cities of the global North and South.

Further, these Salafi communities shared a common goal, networked with each other nationally and transnationally, and revealed themselves to be part of a truly global Salafi network that operated on a transnational level. They were excellent examples of what Metcalf (1996) might call 'sites of creative cultural reproduction'—the 'borderlands'¹⁵ wherein much cultural expression occurs due to the cultural displacement of Muslims around the world, either through migration to a mainly non-Muslim area, or conversion to Islam.¹⁶ In retrospect, I could see that viewing Salafism as a *borderland*, especially in terms of 'claims on space [and] the architecture of built forms and conceptualizations of space'¹⁷ would offer a picture of Muslim (Salafi) life that is 'quite different from the political, or 'fanatical' one often presented in the media and, indeed, in many *scholarly works*', which is vital to acquiring a better understanding of the new religious groups that exist in plural societies.¹⁸

Locating Salafism in the UK

The fact that Salafis living in Birmingham had clearly shown a strong desire to establish distinct physical spaces separate from other mainstream Islamic institutions highlighted that I was in an ideal position to reveal why Birmingham's Salafi community had become a

¹² Upton 2011:100-106.

¹³ It also affirms Berger's (1999) argument that an upsurge of religious conversion and conviction is found to be 'very strong in cities with a high degree of modernization' (1999).

¹⁴ Beaumont 2011:34.

¹⁵ Metcalf 1996: xi.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

blueprint for other burgeoning Salafi communities in the English-speaking global North and South. Furthermore, as the research process progressed for this PhD, I became aware of the dire need for more accurate information on the exact location of other Salafi communities and centres on a national (and international) level, especially when I noted that other researchers have been unable to discern where these Salafi centres are. For example, in his study of mosque trends since the 1980s, Naqshabandi (2015) estimates that out of a total of 1,857 mosques in the UK, 168 are Salafi mosques, and the majority of these are quietist, or ‘open to a degree of non-violent political activism’.¹⁹ Categorising Salafi mosques in this way²⁰ is problematic for Salafis for a number of reasons, not least of which are the consequences entailing the conflation of Salafism with (eventual) violent extremism. Furthermore, these statistics often include those who have outwardly claimed Salafiyyah in the past such as Luton Mosque, Brixton Mosque, Croydon Mosque, Green Lane Mosque and a number of their affiliates, but who do not follow the methodology of the Salaf.

The problem of using the general banner of Salafism in such a broad manner is also evident in Inge’s recent (2017) ‘outsider’ study, wherein Brixton is equated with Birmingham as one ‘of two most prominent Salafi centres in the United Kingdom’.²¹ This fact is refutable solely on the basis of size let alone methodology, as Shavit (2016) observes in his research that the Salafi community affiliated with the Salafi Mosque in Birmingham is ‘home to one of Europe’s largest [S]alafi communities’:

At an average Friday congregational prayer, the mosque has as many as 1,500 attendees. It also operates an independent elementary school, the Salafi Independent School, a secondary school, the Redstone Academy, a publishing house, Salafi Publications, and a thriving bookstore, which offers customers hundreds of volumes. ... [whereas] the attendance at Brixton’s Ibnu Taymiyya Mosque, established as early as mid-1990s, is of smaller proportions. It runs a small bookstore with only a handful of volumes for sale. It does not operate its own school.²²

TABLE 1 List of Salafi Bases/Mosques, Twitter Accounts, and Followers (2024).

Salafi Bases	Twitter	Followers
Salafi Publications	https://twitter.com/SalafiPubs	54.8K
Salafi Bookstore Bham	https://twitter.com/SalafiBookstore	19.1K
Masjid Salafi Bham	https://twitter.com/MasjidSalafi	28.4K
Aston Masjid Bham	https://twitter.com/AstonMasjid	15.1K
Masjid Bin Bāz London	https://twitter.com/Athariyyah	20.5K
Masjid At-Tawheed Cardiff	https://twitter.com/TawheedCardiff	14.2K
Markaz Mu’aadh ibn Jabal Slough	https://titter.com/MarkazMuaadh	31.1K

¹⁹ Cited in Inge 2016:38.

²⁰ See Wiktorowicz (2005) ‘Anatomy of a Salafi Movement’ for a theory of Salafism which divides Salafism into three major Salafi factions: purists, politics, and jihadis.

²¹ Inge 2017:39.

²² Shavit 2016:6.

Tower Hamlets Dawah	https://twitter.com/DawahTH	6,252K
Masjid us Sunnah Cranford	https://twitter.com/MasjidusSunnah	9.7K
Oxford Salafi Dawah	https://twitter.com/Oxford_Dawah	7,734K
Markaz us-Sunnah London	https://twitter.com/_musunnah	13.2K
Salafi Centre Manch.	https://twitter.com/SalafiCentre	32.3K
Masjid al Furqan Stoke	https://twitter.com/IslamStoke	12.4K
City Centre Da'wah Bham	https://twitter.com/CCDawah	13.2K
Albaseerah Bradford	https://twitter.com/albaseerah	14.7K
Markaz Bukhari Liverpool	https://twitter.com/MarkazBukhari	14.3K

More significantly, from an ‘insider’ perspective, categorising Brixton as ‘Salafi’ at all is highly contentious: in the mid-2000s both Brixton and Luton Mosque made transnational allegiances with those in opposition to the Salafi creed. This resulted in senior Salafi scholars Shaykh Rabe’ Ibn Hādi al-Madkhali, Shaykh ‘Ubaid al-Jābiri, Shaykh Ahmad an-Najmi and others declaring these mosques to be *hizbees* (partisans)—a splinter group that opposes the Manhaj of the Salaf and taking direction from ‘innovators’ upon the *Ikhwāni Manhaj* that are antithetical to the creed and methodology of the Salaf.²³ Although the organisers of these two mosques still consider themselves Salafi, in reality, the networks of both do not extend much beyond their local areas in South London and Luton. Their deviation from the Manhaj has also caused them to fall out of league with the global Salafi movement. Moreover, since none of these mosques, nor their affiliates, are deemed to be upon the creed and methodology of the major contemporary scholars, nor have any affiliation with Salafi Publications, they fall outside of the remit of this research.

The need for a study that focused exclusively on the ‘brand’ of Salafism that is pure (i.e., orthodox) in both creed and methodology—which, within Britain, means those Salafi centres and communities that are aligned with the methodology adhered to by Salafi Publications and is well known to the major Salafi scholars in the Arab countries, who have declared Salafi Publications (*Al-Maktabah As-Salafiyyah*) to be a very reliable centre of Salafism in the West—was thus clear in my mind.

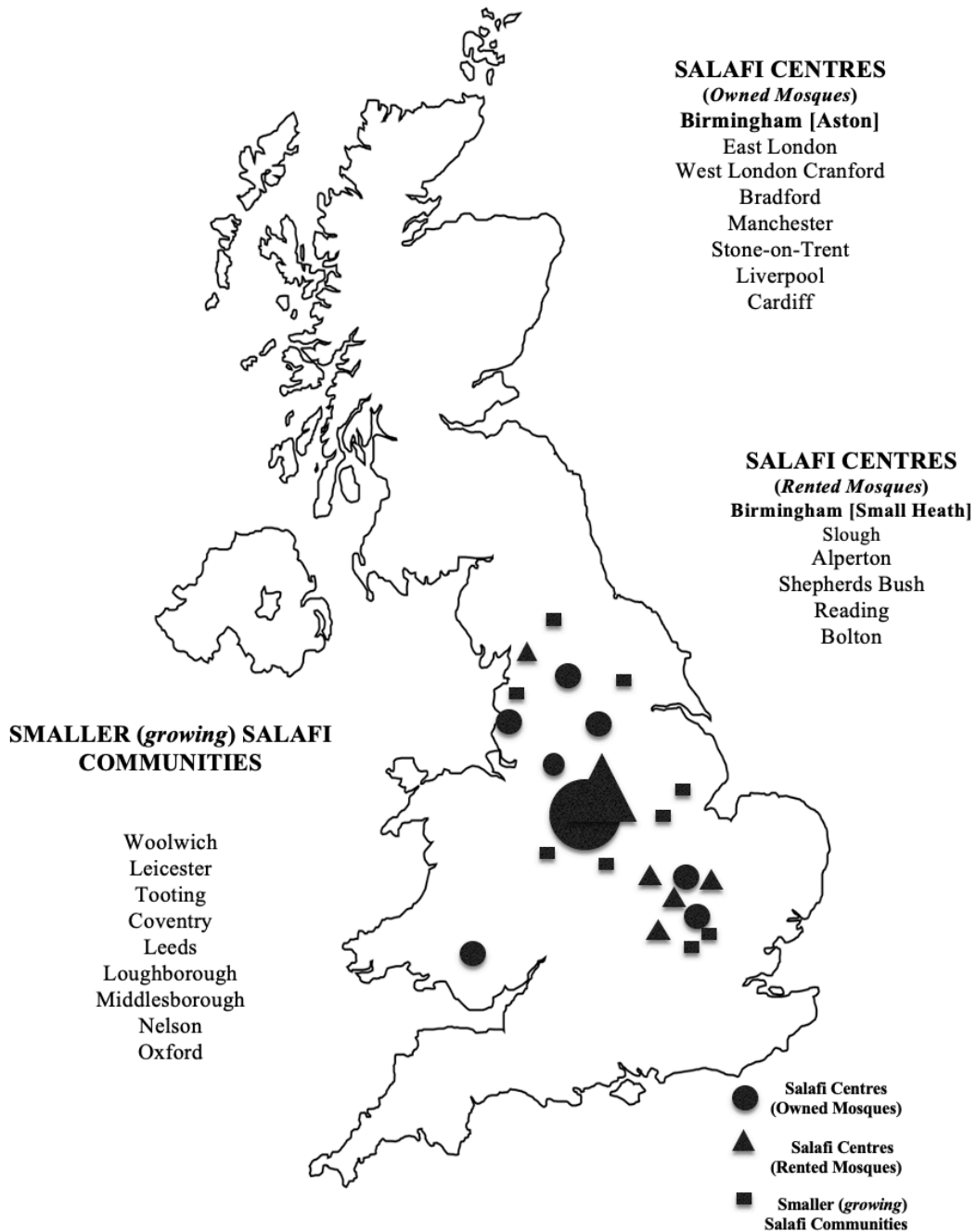
Moreover, detailed and innovative research that clearly distinguishes contemporary Salafism and its adherents from those who merely ascribe to it appeared particularly critical to preventing the far-reaching consequences of Salafism being misconstrued as a religious sect that encourages extremism and terrorist violence in any form, including a soft-power approach. This urgent need for accurate representation in sociological research became even more pressing when I considered the injustice that Salafis might suffer because of their beliefs being misunderstood or misrepresented, as serious scholarship should always aim to make, as much as possible, a just and precise contribution to any field of knowledge.

²³ For a discussion on the deviation of Brixton and Luton Mosques and how they became ‘splinter’ groups no longer affiliated to Salafi Publications and the major scholars of Salafi Islam see: <http://salafitalk.net/st/viewmessages.cfm?Forum=21&Topic=468>

TABLE 2. *Salafi Publications Affiliates in the United Kingdom 2024.*

Religious Placemaking for ‘Purist’ Salafis in the UK

Salafi Centres and Communities affiliated with Salafi Publications in Birmingham



Hence, almost two decades later, I found myself propelled into a vortex of never-ending perplexities accompanied by the stigma and hostility that Salafis—including myself—were increasingly facing in their daily lives because of ‘9/11’, the Arab Spring and Salafism’s conflation with Al-Qaeda and ISIS.²⁴ This was something my family felt acutely when the West Midlands Counter Terrorism Unit advised local Police to set up a safe-room and panic alarm in our home, practise an emergency safety drill with our children, and secure the area around our house, all because they had revealed a threat to my husband’s life from anti-Salafi groups because of his work against radical Khārijite extremism. We had trees burnt down in our front garden and our car windows smashed so many times that we resorted to installing tall railings and a gate around the perimeter of our house.

Further, having felt first-hand the effects of being caught in the crosshairs of the gendered War on Terror²⁵ where Salafi women were seen as charged symbols posing a threat to the nation’s security and to Western civilisation in general, I began thinking about embarking on this study. I realised that my positionality as a Salafi woman [and sociologist] provided me with an excellent vantage point from which to provide an ‘insider’ account of what life is really like within this close-knit and highly segregated religious community in Birmingham. Ultimately, I became aware my work might contribute to what Davie argues is ‘an urgent need for sociologists of religion to take responsibility’ in challenging Samuel Huntington’s (1993, 1997) ‘clash’ rather than dialogue’, which has ‘become, rightly or wrongly, a pervasive frame of reference’ in a post-Cold-War world.²⁶ In turn, it could also aid in ‘the better understanding of the place of religion in the ordering (patterning) of human societies and on a global scale’.²⁷

Thus, my research journey resumed in 2012, and one of the first stages of the research design entailed a critical review of the literature pertinent to the study of female conversion to Salafism in the West. By identifying the key issues, processes and discourses raised by other researchers on the topic of female conversion to Islam in the West, I too hoped to be able to build a conceptual framework that would aid me in my research on female conversion to Salafism in a British context. I also hoped that this would dictate the most suitable methods and tools with which to collate data. From the outset, the research appeared best suited to an ethnographic approach, with which I was already familiar, and would include participant observation, unstructured interviews, field notes, a personal (reflexive) diary and an analysis of documentary sources.

Living in the ‘field’ also meant that my opportunities for conducting fieldwork were almost endless and put me in a very advantageous position to fulfil the role of ethnographer, particularly as I had easier access to a field and its inhabitants than an ‘outsider’ and as the wife of one of the leaders of the Salafi Da’wa in the UK. I did not expect to be able to participate in everything that went on in the community, but I knew I would be able to make efficient use of opportunities and time in the field in order to produce ‘data of better quality, provided that the periods of observation’ were ‘complemented by periods of productive recording and reflection’.²⁸ Hence, for the first two years of the research process, I accompanied my husband to nearly all of his weekly *duroos* (lessons), which took place three times a week. Regular attendance at the evening ‘circles’ at the Salafi Mosque in Small Heath—a focal point

²⁴ Maher 2016.

²⁵ I have been called ‘Ninja’, ‘Batman’, ‘Bin Laden’; and interestingly, more recently I have been called ‘Aunt Lydia’ (name of a character who is a brutal religious zealot in the dystopian novel and popular TV drama *The Handmaid’s Tale*).

²⁶ Davie 2007:8.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Hammersley & Atkinson 1993:48.

for the Salafi community in Birmingham, benefitted me personally in terms of seeking religious instruction and obtaining a stronger theological context for my research. There was one study circle in particular, which started at around the same time as I commenced my research in 2012, that I hoped would prove to be the most fruitful. This ‘sisters-only’ Saturday morning study circle was established to teach issues of religious practice for sisters and to provide a sort of weekly support group to help them overcome the marginality and isolation they can often experience as part of their Salafi lifestyle. I also paid attention to special occasions, such as the month of Ramadān, the two ‘Eids, the annual summer and winter Salafi conferences, and the knowledge-related one day seminar sessions in the Salafi Masjid, to ensure full and representative coverage of the field as opposed to singling out superficially ‘interesting’ events.²⁹ This was a very productive endeavour as these events offered me perspective in terms of understanding the demographics of the local and national Salafi community. Again, I was careful to try to ‘suspend’ the preconceptions, in terms of social science and everyday knowledge, that ethnographers can often encounter because they are very familiar with their setting and because so much of what they discover is so ‘obvious’ in terms of what they already know or expect to discover.³⁰ In maintaining my position as a ‘observer participant’ and ‘by maintaining a distance I hoped to achieve ‘greater objectivity, less reactivity, and a broader perspective’ of the Salafi community in Birmingham.³¹

Early in the research design process, I determined that some feedback from Salafi males within the community might provide further context for this ethnographic study. Here, my first port of call was to ask my husband questions especially with regard to the history of Salafism in the UK, in which he had played a pivotal role. His firsthand accounts proved to be invaluable sources of information, and he was able to provide me with a wealth of archived material on Salafism’s history that I was unlikely to find elsewhere or that was usually unavailable to the general public. His role as one of the people responsible for establishing Salafism in the UK meant that during our extensive discussions, he offered me access to useful and detailed data from male-only settings, particularly information from discussions with other male du’āt (callers/leaders) regarding current affairs within the Salafi community in Birmingham and beyond. I formulated a structured questionnaire that my husband, clearly a ‘gatekeeper’ in his own right, could email to various males within the community who occupied leadership roles. I did not interview these men personally because as a practising Salafi woman I did not want to overstep the boundaries of gender segregation, which are ardently observed within Salafi communities. Although the questionnaire was presented as structured, respondents were informed in advance that they were free to omit or add any information that they felt was relevant, and that the questionnaire could be treated as a guide only.

In addition to written material, I also produced maps and tables to communicate information to the reader in a more accessible manner. These include a map of the UK marking all the developing Salafi communities and centres that exist to date (see above), and a table indicating the size of these communities (see below). The data for this table was collected from other Salafi leaders around the UK who conducted a headcount at the ‘Eid-ul-Fitr prayer 2017 at my husband’s request on my behalf.

²⁹ Hammersley & Atkinson 2019.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Hong and Duff 2002:190.

TABLE 3.3 *Eid-UL-Fitr Prayer Headcount 2017 (Salafi Centres)*

Location	Attendance
Birmingham	6000
East London	2000
Slough	2000
Alperton	1200
Manchester	700
Bolton	600
Cardiff	600
Cranford	2000
Loughborough/Nottingham/Leicester	100
Bradford	700
Southend	35
Shepherds Bush	600
Reading	175
Oxford	18
Nelson	NA
Leeds	NA

Salafi Researcher, Positionality and Reflexivity

In the spirit of Malinowski’s theory of immersion and my own positionality as an ethnographer who shares the core ideas and beliefs of the community being studied, I hoped to use my privilege of being able to freely interact with other Salafi women to gain a multi-layered and critical cultural perspective for understanding women’s conversion to Salafism—one that avoids ethnocentricity. In learning about Salafi women’s personal experiences of this new lifestyle—a ‘born-again’ experience (Nieuwkerk 2006)—I aimed to determine both their personal motivations for change and how they identified themselves as part of a new community in a British context. In turn, this analysis would highlight the workings of more broader social processes and discourses taking place within the context of women’s conversion narratives both pre- and post-conversion, since ‘religious conversion is never merely an act of individual will or choice but always takes place within—and alters—a specific historical,

social, and cultural context'.³² This is because 'studying an individual biography does not bring with it the isolated individual, but rather an awareness of the individual in society'.³³

A qualitative approach would offer readers an initial insight into Salafism's culture and social processes and would be a good source from which to develop hypotheses for future investigations using other research methods. Choosing ethnography as my main method of social enquiry felt quite natural, especially since investigating the phenomenon of female conversion to Salafism required an approach that could reveal the symbolic meanings attached to such an orthodox way of life and culture as opposed to a quantitative and positivist approach which seeks to verify and measure some objective truth or reality that is believed to exist 'out there'. This study set out to search for 'meaning', which is subjective, dynamic and contextual, without detracting in any way from the authenticity of the experience of my respondents.

Reality for Salafi women is evidently context-bound—that is, it cannot be generalised, only transferred to other similar contexts. For example, the subjective meanings Salafi women attach to the practice of veiling illustrates why this approach is more suitable for a small-scale study that seeks to understand personal motivations and meanings. This entailed a critical reflection upon my own position as a researcher, as I share close ties with those who pioneered Salafism's spread throughout the UK and beyond. I was also aware that unless I met the task of providing a narrative from 'within', the penalty for such a 'lack of vigilance' may have been that some "official version" would come to represent 'a true and final account of the past' that was at odds with those for whom Salafism is a lived reality.³⁴ Added to this awareness was also the fear that an incomplete or incorrect narrative of the emergence of Salafism in the West and its appeal to converts might 'also come to form part of an unjustifiable, clearly distorting 'dominant ideology' within its receiving society'.³⁵ This is already occurring in the media, journalism and some sections of academia—in their attempts to 'explain' Salafism, they have only perpetuated Islamophobic stereotypes.

Further, I felt that my own experience of coming to Salafism would serve as a path to encourage respondents to take part in the research and be an informal vetting procedure for contacts interested in my motives for studying Salafi women. Theorists describe this process as the 'understanding phase', wherein 'mutual self-disclosures of peripheral personal information dominate' interactions; it is also described as the 'testing out' and 'sizing up' phase, which 'is a feature of all social interaction ... and of the resultant performances ... essential to competent ethnography'.³⁶ Within a couple of months of running two pilot interviews, I had managed to conduct 30 unstructured interviews with Salafi women who lived in Birmingham but came from a diversity of social and cultural backgrounds. I kept in mind Kristin Luker's advice that while seeking 'to identify patterns in the data ... the point of interviews ... is not what is going on inside one person's head, but what is going on inside *lots* of people's heads'.³⁷

In Ekins and Stone's reflections on their PhD journey, they write about realising that their research was about themselves.³⁸ They question the entire foundation of their research and

³² 'Appreciation, Analysis, and Critique: The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion and the Future of Conversion Studies', by Chad M. Bauman, 15th August 2016.

³³ Plummer 1983:20.

³⁴ Butler 2002:36.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hong and Duff 2002:193.

³⁷ Luker 2008:167 cited in Roberts and Yamane 2016:35.

³⁸ Ekins and Stone, 2012:5.

ask whether it was about participants' responses to the research questions, or more about the 'transformative process' it was going to be for the authors themselves.³⁹ That is, do researchers, as C Wright Mills (1959) suggests, try 'to understand' their 'own experiences through the experience of others?'⁴⁰ Such notions reaffirm that as researchers and individuals, our values 'significantly underpin the research process', and that it is 'impossible to detach ourselves' from them.⁴¹ This realisation should lead to a 'greater critical awareness of our own biography and how this impacts upon us' as researchers and as people.⁴² In contemplating my own reasons for taking on the current research project, I too noted how, in many ways, this PhD was about me:

In 1995 I embarked upon an ethnographic journey researching the topic of religion and ethnicity amongst first- and second-generation Pakistani women in Britain which was very much an existential project. During that time, I became *Salafi* and never looked back... and although I never completed that PhD, here I am again, almost 20 years later, still in the 'field', on another ethnographic journey—and in many ways it feels like the same journey, but this time I am further down the path of discovery (Fieldwork diary entry 21st March 2015).

Locating Salafi Women's Voices

The above quotation demonstrates how research projects are often driven by a researcher's own philosophical values and beliefs in relation to issues they feel are important. My recent research almost felt as though it was providing some closure for my previous, incomplete PhD project, but this time, the premise was less to do with my own self-identity and more to do with the question of why other women with whom I did not share a cultural or social background all ended up on the same religious path as I had. Further, throughout this journey, I realised that I was not only learning about the motives and causes of conversion of others, but also forming a better understanding of those same elements in my own story. As Stone points out, quite frequently, while trying to recognise the influence our own 'voice' can have on the research outcome and process, we find that it is 'deeply buried within our persona, and only emerges as a result of our reflections about the positioning of ourselves within the research process'.⁴³ Hitchcock and Hughes' (1995) sum this up succinctly:

Ontological assumptions give rise to epistemological assumptions; these, in turn, give rise to methodological consideration: and these, in turn, give rise to issues of instrumentation and data collection. This view moves us beyond regarding research methods as simply a technical exercise and as concerned with understanding the world: this is informed by how we view our world(s), what we take understanding to be and what we see as the purposes of understanding (Cohen et al 2007:5, in Ekins and Stone 2012:6)

It was also important to consider that the *power* conferred upon me as the researcher could easily have an impact on both respondents and readers. I had the power to represent participants' lives in the text, but still had to keep in mind 'certain important potential readers' such as 'professional colleagues, reviewers, and editors, as well as a broad range of

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

general audiences.⁴⁴ The issue of audience and location is not just a matter of theoretical representation, but also a factor shaped by the research environments researchers face.⁴⁵ Power relations thus existed between myself as the researcher (translator) and the respondents and between the researcher (author) and the audience.⁴⁶ As a result, I became more aware that as there is always an expectation for academic work produced to be ‘understandable and acceptable’ for a broad audience; this includes the translation of certain Islamic terminologies or the use of certain terms/words, and even the tone and purpose of the research ‘write-up’.⁴⁷ All of this was strongly related to my sociocultural positioning as a female Salafi researcher. My role thus involved carefully authoring chapters featuring details that contextualised the background and meaning of Salafism as a religion of non-Western origin, despite the fact that in other contexts, this knowledge might be common sense. Kim (2012) considers this requirement for work to be ‘understandable and acceptable’ problematic, as it is ‘unidirectional’ and caters for a Western, mainly English-speaking audience.⁴⁸

Further, the issue of ‘voice’ is another important consideration when reading and writing ethnography. In a reflexive process where the researcher writes themselves into the text, deciding how to present the data in terms of how they represent the feelings of ‘others’ in accordance with the researcher’s own views can be a challenging task:

Representation, of course, is always self-presentation—that is, the Other’s presence is directly connected to the writers’ self-presence in the text. The ‘Other’ who is presented in the text is always a version of the researcher’s self. Krieger argues: ‘When we discuss others, we are always talking about ourselves. Our images of ‘them’ are images of ‘us’” (1991:5) Even when ‘we’ allow the ‘Other’ to speak when we talk about or for them, we are taking over their voice (Denzin 2009: 91-92, in Ekins and Stone 2012:7).

Thus, we should consider whose ‘story’ we are *actually* telling when we write ethnography. Is it the story of the participants told through their own voice or through ours? Does ‘the story actually become our own story, a conscious or unconscious narrative reflective our own values and life experience?’⁴⁹ Holliday (2007) suggests that there are ‘four voices’ in the final presentation of data: ‘the researcher’s personal narrative, the data, the researcher’s commentary on the data as it is collected, and the researcher’s voice as they present and analyse it’.⁵⁰ Schwandt (1994) poses a similar argument that ‘multiple realities are evident in the research; the researcher’s own realities; the realities of the participants; and the different ways these realities are constructed’.⁵¹ These ties in with Kim (2012) and Narayan’s (1993) view that identities consist of different trajectories of positionality. As Mercer (2007) puts it, ‘boundaries are permeable ... we are all multiple insiders and outsiders moving back and forth across different boundaries as different situations involving different boundaries arise’.⁵²

⁴⁴ Kim 2012:141.

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Temple and Young, 2004 in Kim 2012:141

⁴⁸ Kim 2012:142.

⁴⁹ Ekins and Stone 2012:7.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

Conclusions

This article aimed to provide the basis for my personal and academic motivations for conducting research on why women living in the Salafi community in Birmingham have chosen to live in accordance with an orthodox interpretation of Islam known as Salafism. In particular, it offered a glimpse into my own story of coming to Salafism whilst also acknowledging how my own background might affect my study subject, the research process, and its overall outcome and conclusions.

The article also attempted to show that although the research project was conducted from a unique insider female perspective which was benefitted from my privileged access to certain information about the Salafi community in Birmingham, the issue of reflexivity was a deeply complex one. It highlighted that writing ethnography within a relativist paradigm meant that my position as researcher was a very powerful one wherein ‘reflexive self-critique or regress is literally written into the “text”’.⁵³ This arose largely from the fact that my selection and use of theoretical frameworks and my approach to presenting the words and life stories of my respondents in authoritative academic terms was ultimately a matter for me alone to choose.⁵⁴

⁵³ Butler 2002:31.

⁵⁴ Smith 1989, in Kim 2012:138.

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