



Reading an Islamic epistemology into research: Muslim converts and contemporary religion in Britain

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Abstract

This paper presents a tentative argument for the application of a unique methodological approach in researching convert Muslims in contemporary Britain. By throwing into relief some of the theoretical limitations of previous studies on the topic, a case is made for a dialectical model of thinking that foregrounds Islamic epistemology and places it into conversation with a critical posture. The article contributes to a wider discourse within academia about the ability of the contemporary study of religion to reflect the increasingly diverse world of religious and non-religious practice found in contemporary Britain. It is critical of the over enfranchisement of secular readings of Islamic conversion specifically, and orientalist framings of Islamic identity generally. I conclude by asserting insider positionality and the primacy of reflexivity as an approach to ensure intellectual rigour.

1 Introduction

The problematisation of the Muslim population's interaction with the education system of the UK can be traced back to shortly after World War II, when, as a result of severe labour shortages, workers from the Indian subcontinent were invited to Britain to work (Shaw, 1988; Hansen, 1999). While education represented an early point of contact between the burgeoning Muslim community and the state and marked an important element in the modern history of UK/Muslim relations, the literature examining Muslims' *religious* (as opposed to racial or cultural) identity as a discrete group in the state education framework was severely limited until the 1980s (Modood et al., 1997; Modood 1994; 2004; Ansari, 2002). That decade represented a paradigmatic shift away from assimilationist and integrationist theory (Race, 2005: 7) towards a multiculturalism that was, ostensibly, empathetic towards religious subjecthood. It is during this period that attempts to deal with the religious identity of Muslims began to formulate and essentialist understandings of religion began to be challenged more frequently within academic literature. For example, the Swann Report

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(1985), although criticised by some (Dwyer & Meyer, 1995; Verma, 1989; Duncan, 1987) as continuing to deal ‘with Muslims in terms of cultural and ethnic group, rather than in terms of religious principles and priorities’ (Nielsen, 2004: 58), is broadly considered to be instrumental in recognising the importance of providing minorities a stake in education and the wider political landscape within a multicultural society (Malik, 2015). It falls beyond the scope of this paper to offer a detailed delineation of the various forms of multiculturalist theory. However, the rise of multiculturalism in Britain, defined by Parker-Jenkins (1995: 17) as ‘creating tolerance for minority children, dispelling ignorance and reducing prejudice to create a harmonious society’, spurred more nuanced debates on the nature of social justice and gave rise to more critical explorations of identity. While it would be reductive to suggest that continued debate surrounding the ‘Muslim problematic’ did not persist (e.g., Muslim faith schools, rising secularism, Islamophobia in schools, etc.) (Parker-Jenkins, 1995; Parker-Jenkins et al., 2005; Runnymede Trust, 1997, 2008), this more acute consideration of Muslim identity dominated public debate on policy for decades (Nielsen, 1986; Wahhab, 1989; Peach, 1990; Vertovec, 1993; Khan, 2000; Modood, 2010). However, following the 2001 riots across England, which were characterised as the result of the socio-cultural segregation of Asian and Muslim youth (Home Office, 2001), the attacks of 9/11 and the resultant ‘war on terror’, and culminating in the 7/7 bombings, policy and public opinion underwent a seismic shift (Revell, 2012).

No longer was ‘the Muslim integration problem’ viewed purely through the lens of spatial segregation (Miah, 2015). The issue had become one of cultural segregation, with the presiding call one of combating extremism in the Muslim community and integrating young, Asian men into mainstream British society (Finney & Simpson, 2009). It was suggested that previous policies had facilitated segregation, led to cultural alienation and acted as a conduit for radicalisation (Taylor, 2009). The government recognised that one of the key areas in which policy might seek to redress this problem was in the schooling and education of Muslims, leading to the formation of educational policies designed to combat the growing problem (HM Government, 2015; Lander 2019). Addressing the slew of policies that emerged during that period, Revell (2012) writes:

The scope and range of government intervention in education in relation to extremism and its links to Islam constitutes a coherent and systematic framework that effectively criminalises aspects of theology, education, cultural practices and community that are associated with Islam. (p. 82 & 83)

With the regulatory gaze of educational policy extending to matters of Islamic theology, the post-9/11 policy milieu was judged by some as a “new assimilationism” (Back et al., 2002: 452) and a disassembling of previously well-established relationships between Muslim communities and local government authorities (Marshall, 2010). Furthermore, scholars in the fields of sociology (Modood, 2004, 2010; Parekh, 2008; Sealy, 2021a), religion (Davie, 2015) and education (Panjwani & Moulin-Stožek, 2017) intimate that the form of multiculturalism which took root in this period appeared to harbour a theoretically rooted mistrust of religious *qua religious* identity, preferring to elide Muslims’ religious and ethno-cultural identity. This has had the result of positioning discretely religious identity as culturally ‘other’ within the social imaginary (Modood, 2013; Levey & Modood, 2009). This suspicion is perhaps reflected in contemporary debates about the future of Religious Educa-

tion (RE). It is notable, for example, that the final report of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) (2018) recommended that RE be renamed ‘Religion and Worldviews’ partly ‘to signify... concepts such as “secularity”, “secularism” and “spirituality”’ (p. 7). It is against this contextual backdrop that contemporary Muslim converts, who the literature suggests, tend to display discretely religious identities (Sealy, 2021a; Panjwani, 2017: 602), have emerged as the subject of sociological inquiry.

While contemporary literature has gone some way in detailing the implications of the aforementioned socio-political climate (Imtiaz, 2011; Lewis, 2007; Modood 2010) and policy imperatives (Miah, 2017) upon the wider British Muslim community, particularly within the context of education (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020), a broad-brush approach to understanding the diversities within this minority means that there is a dearth of literature exploring the experiences of Muslim converts within this realm (Panjwani, 2017: 602).

Given the CoRE report’s advocacy of, among other things, a more nuanced understanding of religions and the diversity that exists within ‘fluid and dynamic’ institutional worldviews (CoRE, 2018: 36), a closer look at one of the key diversities amongst contemporary British Muslims is timely. As Ahs et al., (2019) note, any revision of the RE curriculum must seek to recognise the ‘variations and fluidity’ (p. 212) in the ways in which people, particularly the younger generation, practice and experience spirituality and religion. And while there remains no exact count of the number of Muslim converts in the UK (Pędziwiatr, 2017; Sealy, 2019b), it is clear that there is a sizeable and growing population within the evolving Muslim demographic (Brice, 2011; Jawad, 2013; Sealy, 2021a); one that requires a degree of sustained academic reflection. Acknowledging that, this article engages with some of the key theoretical limitations of existing literature on the topic of conversion to Islam in Britain, contributing to a discussion about the methodological approaches suited to extending knowledge about this diverse minority. The paper critiques the over-enfranchisement of secular readings of conversion in current discourse and highlights the distinctive contribution insider research may bring to knowledge creation in the field of religion. I posit that one of the ways in which we may extend understanding of the religious development and identity formation of Muslim converts is by bringing a ‘theological ear’ (Keenan, 2003: 20) to academic work on the topic. The article, therefore, presents tentative arguments for the use of a unique methodological dialectic which foregrounds an Islamic epistemology in conjunction with critical narrative and ethnographic approaches.

2 Conversion in the literature

The subject of conversion has long been one of academic interest, spawning a variety of theories and academic outputs in the fields of psychology (Starbuck, 1897; James, 2015), sociology (Lofland & Stark, 1965), theology (Rambo, 1993) and comparative religion (Underwood, 1925). However, with the growing number of Britons converting to Islam at a time in which the religion has entered the social imaginary through the negative frames of Islamophobia and Orientalism (Allen, 2010; Pędziwiatr, 2015), and with the mainstream media’s construction of converts as cultural threats, closely associated with terrorism and prone to radicalism (Spoliar & Brandt, 2020; Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017; Moosavi, 2014; Brice, 2011, 13–16; Sealy, 2017, 198–200), the experiences of contemporary British Muslim converts has attracted some recent scholarly attention.

The nascent body of work in this area has tended, however, to focus upon conversion patterns and processes (Roald, 2004, 2012), dynamics of change and continuity (Alydreessy, 2016), socio-political context (Flower, 2013), identity (Brice, 2011; Pędziwiatr, 2017; Sealy, 2021c), race (Moosavi, 2014, 2015) and gender (Spoliar & Brandt, 2020; Ramahi & Suleiman, 2017). What emerges from over two decades of research into the convert experience following 9/11 is a sharp dissonance between the religious motivations and perspectives spoken about by converts themselves (Sealy, 2021c) and the ways in which they are constructed and theorised about in the discourse. This dissonance presents itself in a variety of ways. In some instances, the authenticity of conversion itself is questioned, reproducing orientalist tropes of Muslims' 'incapacity for self-representation, self-understanding, self-consciousness' (Said, 1985: 97). In other instances, conversion is framed through exclusively socio-political prisms, with notions of cultural betrayal, cultural hybridity and adherence to counterculture as a response to secularisation taking the fore. While it would be reductive to dismiss these perspectives on the motivations and patterns behind conversion to Islam in modern Britain, there appears to be a notably secular bias in reading Islamic conversion; an attempt to rationalise the phenomenon within secular paradigms. Seemingly absent from the literature are theoretical approaches which enfranchise and faithfully capture the epistemological and ontological viewpoints of the converts themselves. This absence reveals an inadequacy in current theorisations of Muslim conversion and points to implications upon the knowledge built about this group. Rambo's (2003) comments on the topic are illustrative of this point:

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)

As well as cautioning researchers investigating conversion to Islam in a post-9/11 world to move beyond the application of theories that have proven inadequate in explaining patterns of conversion to Islam in modern Britain (McLoughlin, 1998; Hussain, 1999; Al-Qwidi, 2002), and which fail to address the paradox of Islamic conversion in light of the large body of literature in the field of 'secularisation theory' which predicted an inexorable secularisation of Western civilisation (Berger, 1969: 133; Wilson 1976: 85; Martin 1967: 100), Rambo's exhortation encourages new research perspectives and new types of researchers.

3 New eyes: a case for the insider

There has undoubtedly been a spectrum of scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim, who have deployed a variety of methods in the study of converts to Islam in post-9/11 Britain. However, the literature exposes a surprising lack of variation in researcher positionality. Sealy's (2019a; 2019b; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c) efforts to foreground religiosity and enfranchise the theological perspective of converts is perhaps the most theoretically notable

attempt at bringing new eyes to the field. However, in being ‘guided by a methodological agnosticism, in contrast to methodological atheism’ (Sealy, 2019b: 57), I contend that his body of work falls short of providing the epistemological space for the Islamic convert’s authentic voice to be heard. I have argued that this limitation is instructive of the need for insider research (Adebolajo, 2022).

The value of the ‘complete member’, insider researcher (Adler & Adler, 1987) may seem obvious in the context of research involving Muslim converts. In sharing many of the religious views and spiritual perspectives of the research subjects, the insider may already possess a deeper insight into the lived experiences of the group; an insight that may be inaccessible to the non-native, outsider researcher. Yet, for every argument in favour of the enhanced depth an insider brings to the field of knowledge, questions abound regarding the objectivity and intellectual rigour of the insider’s research endeavour. What Neitz (2013: 129–130) describes as the ‘neopositivist assumption that the researcher’s objectivity is essential to producing valid, value-neutral research, and that objectivity is produced through methodologies that reduce or even eliminate bias’, throws into question the positionality of such a researcher, along with the methodologies which she deploys. It is this questioning that I will now subject to critique.

4 Objectivity and reflexivity

I begin by problematising the acceptance of Western assumptions within the human and social sciences (Al-Zeera, 2001; see also Liddicoat & Zarate 2009: 10–11) and call for an attitude of criticism of the notion that any of the methodological stances can ever be impartial and value-free. Guba & Lincoln (1981) summarise the dominant objectivist paradigm as carrying with it ‘an axiological assumption of value-freedom, that is, that the methodology guarantees that the results of an inquiry are essentially free from the influence of any value system (bias)’ (p. 28). My own Islamic epistemological posture is inclined to reject this notion (Ahmed, 2017; Al-Zeera, 2001) and can be summarised by Al-Zeera (2001), who notes:

The neutrality and freedom from value in scientific and educational research is a dangerous assumption that is fostered by the so-called scientific approach. Suppression of values, principles, and beliefs for the sake of being ‘objective’ causes severe damage to people and to humanity. It numbs the feelings and emotions and develops irresponsible individuals. (p. 35).

In the abovementioned theoretical perspective, an alignment with the critical tradition emerges; a concession that all research is prejudiced by human interests (Sprague, 2005) and that validity in research is achieved, not in pursuit of an objective standing, but through careful interrogation of one’s prejudices. Rose (1985) summarises this point thus:

There is no neutrality. There is only greater or less awareness of one’s biases. And if you do not appreciate the force of what you’re leaving out, you are not fully in command of what you’re doing (p. 77).

Both the critical and Islamic positions argue that researchers are socialised into accepting that the objectivist, ‘scientific’ method of obtaining knowledge is the only method of rigor and that other ways of knowing are less respectable. Al-Zeera (2001) refers to this socialisation as a type of colonisation of knowledge (p. 36), defined by Raskin (Raskin & Bernstein, 1987) as *‘the elimination of alternate explanations, and the unwillingness to accept the interrelationships between the sort of science we do, how we do it, the questions we ask, and the sorts of ‘proof’ we require.* (p. 160).

In the Islamic paradigm’s ontological acceptance of an objective reality (Ahmed, 2014), and in its rejection of scientific neutrality, we begin to see a dialectical model of thinking emerge alongside an unsettling of the mono-perspective. It is upon the axis of this dialectic that the methodology I am positing is able to pivot between the rigor of qualitative sociological inquiry whilst recognising the divine by ensuring interpretation of data retains ‘the integrity of intellectual and spiritual identity’ (Al-Zeera, 2001: 76). An important implication of recognising the complex multiplicity involved in occupying the subjectivities of a researcher and cultural insider is the need to centre reflexivity. While varying notions of reflexivity have been articulated within educational research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Lynch, 2000; Reinhartz, 1992; Wasserfall 1997; Nixon et al., 2003), each has to do with an exercise in the researcher deconstructing her own prejudices in order to acknowledge and analyse the effects of those prejudices upon the research. In so doing, reflexivity leads to improved ‘quality and validity of the research and recognizing the limitations of the knowledge that is produced which leads to more rigorous research’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004: 275).

5 Dialectical thinking and critical theory

Further implications of the dialectical model of thinking I have described above can be seen in the multi-perspective attitude I will adopt in the discussions to follow. For example, in speaking of the features of objectivist and subjectivist paradigms that align with my epistemology, I touch upon an understanding of researcher neutrality which is suspicious of the hegemony of Western research paradigms’ and the dismissal of other ways of knowing (Duderija, 2013: 69). This reveals a further strand of the dialectic that upholds my proposed methodology; the lineament of criticality within Islamic research (Niyozov & Memon, 2011; Duderija, 2013; Gilani-Williams, 2014). It is, perhaps, unsurprising to consider that an Islamic epistemology points towards a critical posture, considering the numerous social scientists who have placed Islamic research methods within the discourse of critical inquiry on the basis of shared concerns between the Islamic worldview and that of critical theorists (Denzin et al., 2008; Reagan 2005; Connell, 2007; Al-Zeera, 2001; Ahmed, 2017).

While there are recognised philosophical tension between the Islamic and critical paradigms, research based upon Islamic epistemological principles has tended to be concerned with a desire to change social situations (Kazmi, 2000; Bahi, 2008; Sadek, 2012); a desire shared by the critical theorist. In its linguistic disjuncture from *traditional* theory (Jay, 1973), *critical* theory points towards a critique of, and desire to change, rather than simply describe, the social situation (Bohman, 1996). Thus, both Islamic research paradigms and critical research paradigms tend to adopt a concern for less enfranchised peoples (Freire, 1972; Gilani-Williams, 2014), harbouring a theoretically rooted mistrust of the socially con-

structured meanings provided to us (Vandenberg, 2011, p. 26). Both paradigms proceed from an acknowledgement that our social world is fraught with injustices and inequalities. Both call into question commonly held values and the assumptions which reinforce them. It is in this vein that the theoretical dialectic described in this article is well suited to problematising commonly held assumptions found in previous studies into the experiences of convert Muslims.

The points of confluence mentioned do not, I concede, resolve the philosophical tensions that exist between critical theory and the theological perspective of the Islamic paradigm. Indeed, an obvious quandary surfaces when describing a faith-based epistemological approach as 'critical': How does such an approach retain its faith-based foundations in the widely cast shadow of the anti-religious sentiment of Marxism, which is so often associated with critical theory? In answer to this, I suggest that Marxism has no monopoly over the critical posture in social science research, nor is it, by necessity, secular (Asad et al., 2013). Additionally, the lack of internal consistency within critical perspectives (Crotty, 1998) discounts any claim to a methodological orthodoxy that disbars my faith perspective. Crotty's (1998: 13–14) vision of the process of crafting a research methodology becomes relevant here:

In a very real sense, every piece of research is unique and calls for a unique methodology. We, as the researcher, have to develop it... We acquaint ourselves with the various methodologies... We weigh their strengths and weaknesses. Having done all that and more besides, we still have to forge a methodology that will meet our particular purposes in this research.

It is this understanding of the process of negotiation between 'various methodologies', as a weighing of strengths and weaknesses in pursuit of a way towards extending knowledge that justifies this new approach to researching contemporary Muslim converts.

6 Beyond the theory

The dialectical thinking outlined thus far moves me beyond a mere reconciliation of paradigmatic tensions, towards a deeper consideration of the methods that will allow me as an insider researcher to hear and see the narratives and experiences of converts in ways that 'outsiders cannot' (Flanagan, 2008: 258). Much like the paradigmatic tensions, however, there may, at first, appear to be a degree of incompatibility between the lineaments of ethnographic and narrative inquiry that I shall advocate and expound upon in this section of the paper. Given the fact that ethnography has been noted as 'a genre that discredits or discourages narrative, subjectivity, confessional, personal anecdote, or accounts of the ethnographers' or anyone else's experience' (Tyler, 1987: 92), the application of this element within my proposed methodology requires further examination. It is useful to begin this examination with a look at the historical development of the ethnographic methodology and, in so doing, highlight the features of the methodology which are uniquely placed to redress some of the limitations found in previous studies.

6.1 Ethnography

With the earliest ethnographies being the informal, amateur accounts of eighteenth and nineteenth century ‘explorers, travellers, medical doctors, colonial officers [and] missionaries’ (Tedlock, 1991:69), it was not until around the First World War that the ‘academic orthodoxy’ of ethnography began to develop into the research methodology it is widely known as today (Firth, 1985; Stocking, 1982); one in which epistemic value is placed upon conducting fieldwork through extended immersion into cultural groups. And while differences in approach amongst ethnographers persisted (Kirsch, 1982), the overarching enterprise was the same; a marrying of the affectional, psychological attachment that cultural participation entails, and the scientific detachment that observation of cultures entails (Tedlock, 1991: 69). The result was the production of data that purported to reflect the ‘native’s’ point of view’ (Malinowski, 2017: 25) and bring about knowledge and understanding.

It is to be noted that this form of participatory immersion into the field sometimes resulted in accounts of what ethnographers have called ‘going native’ (Given, 2008), a situation in which the researcher becomes so immersed within the cultural group under investigation that she loses a sense of the ‘scientific objectivity’ (Paul, 1953: 441). Within anthropological conceptualisation of ethnography, this represents an untenable threat to ethnographic fieldwork (Tyler, 1987; Devereux, 1967); a perceived unbridgeable gap between the objectivism required for the *science* of ethnography and the subjectivism of the participants under observation. Nestled within such a position, I contest, is the assumption of the superiority of objectivity; the position that reality can only be known by the outsider, and that the participants ‘way of knowing’, therefore, is of lesser value. My own epistemological sensibilities reject these early anthropological understandings of ethnography and instead encourage a reconsideration of the objectivist position in ethnographic research through what Tedlock (1991; 2004) describes as ‘narrative ethnography’:

The author of a narrative ethnography also deals with experiences, but along with these come ethnographic data, epistemological reflections on fieldwork participation, and cultural analysis. The world, in a narrative ethnography, is re-presented as perceived by a situated narrator, who is also present as a character in the story that reveals his own personality.’ (Tedlock, 1991: 77–8).

In this description, a form of ethnography which is aligned to the acceptance of the value-laden researcher takes shape. The ‘situated narrator’ in narrative ethnography must centre reflexivity and participant subjectivity, leaving epistemological space for the emergence of newer types of ethnographers from different cultures, genders, races and religions that bring with them new perspectives and critical awareness which should be valued as a ‘democratisation of knowledge’ (Tedlock, 1991: 80). The criticality underpinning this particular way of being ethnographic is intended to ‘help researchers understand relations of power by merging a critical stance with a complex and dynamic qualitative strategy of enquiry’ (Vandenberg, 2011: 25). In seeking to explore convert experiences in a post-9/11 socio-political landscape, and in the face of what has been referred to as ‘epistemic injustice’ (Scott-Baumann et al., 2020: 39) perpetrated against Islam in British educational settings, narrative ethnography, I postulate, can provide ‘a more direct style of thinking about the relationships among knowledge, society, and political action’ (Thomas, 1993: vii).

6.2 Narrative

Another important lineament of my proposed methodology is the feature of narrative. Here, a clarification of the term 'narrative' is in order. It is necessary to differentiate narrative inquiry, the qualitative research genre which has been growing in popularity (Dhunpath, 2000; du Preez, 2008), from the term 'narrative' as it has been understood linguistically. This clarification will serve to illustrate how narrative inquiry can provide intimate, complex social insight. It will also make plain, not only the suitability of narrative inquiry for engaging with convert Muslim participants, but also the synergy between the ethnographic and narrative elements of the dialectical approach outlined in this paper.

6.3 Narrative inquiry

At times referring to the mere expression of qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the term 'narrative' has been deployed equivocally in social science literature (du Preez, 2008). However, in my use of the term 'narrative', I am concerned with the more limited definition used by qualitative researchers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); 'research designs in which stories are used to describe human action... and happenings are configured into a temporal unity by means of a plot.' (Polkinghorne, 1995: 5). The linguistic form of story has historically proven to be well suited to conveying human experience as situated in the lived world (Kenyon & Randall, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 1992; Ricoeur, 1991), justifying its growing popularity as a qualitative research methodology. However, with the visceral association of story and fiction in literature (Polkinghorne, 1995: 7), the concept of story has unavoidably been associated with pure subjectivity and considered an affront to traditional empiricist notions of knowledge. It is important then to reiterate that the Islamic epistemological position is comfortable with subjectivity in social science and, therefore, gives currency to the tendency of stories to disrupt the dominance of purely objectivistic approaches by bringing to light the relativistic truths embedded in individuals' narratives. As Dhunpath (2000) notes, narrative research can act 'as a counterculture' to the 'dominance of empirical tradition' (p. 543).

The intimate understanding of the lived experiences of convert Muslims, which narrative inquiry and insider ethnography may yield, has the potential to shed further light upon the aforementioned dissonance between converts' perspectives and the ways in they are represented in academic literature. In turn, this may bring into sharp relief the epistemic injustices that they face. Narratives are, after all, inherently, situated in political contexts, unavoidably entrenched in dynamics of power and politics and able to make heard 'the voices of the silenced' (Dhunpath, 2000: 550).

7 Conclusion

This article is, in many ways, a reflection of and upon my own positionality as a Muslim convert researcher. It is born of the inability to see my own story and self in the current body of literature. It is also, in some ways, a response to the developing literature surrounding the reframing of Religious Education in Britain (Miedema, 2014; Teece, 2017; CoRE, 2018; Everington 2018; Freathy & John, 2019). With a growing number of scholars advocating

the shift towards the study of Worldviews (Cush, 2021; Cooling, 2019, 2020, 2021; Cooling et al., 2020; Shaw, 2020; Freathy & John, 2019), an examination of how the subject might prise religious identity apart from ethnic and cultural identity may be valuable. By highlighting the tendency of Western scholarly voices to distort the religious voice of Muslim converts in search of secular rationalisations, this paper argues for the foregrounding of an Islamic epistemology. By describing the methodological undergirding of my own doctoral research, I tentatively assert the value of insider research as a way of recovering the theological voice. It is important to note, however, that my advocacy of insider research is not to indicate a belief that ‘insider’ research is, by necessity, more valuable than the research data and insight gleaned by researchers on the ‘outside’. Rather, my proposition is that the type of insider research described here offers a ‘different’ (Twine, 2000) source of knowledge and insight which is ‘no less true’ (Gunaratnam, 2003: 92).

Inevitably, a significant deliberation that surfaces as a result of this positionality is the primacy of reflexivity as a tool with which to problematise the relationship between researcher and researched. In recognising that the researcher is situated within a context and possessing a history, there must come recognition that the researcher is a part of the project. This requires, not only that they discuss their own beliefs and values in a broad sense, but also that they interrogate their own interpretations of the literature surrounding the topic, the data that comes from participants and ultimately the knowledge that the study produces. This process of acknowledgment and self-interrogation (Nixon et al., 2003: 102) constitutes a foregrounding of reflexive practice in the proposed methodology. I conclude this article by making a case for the dialectical model of thinking that combines lineaments of ethnography and narrative inquiry together with a critical posture. In adding momentum to the growing number of Muslim researchers asserting Islamic conceptualisations of knowledge and research design within intellectual spaces (Niyozov & Memon, 2011; Memon & Zaman, 2016; Ahmed, 2012, 2016a, b, 2017; Merry, 2007; Rasiah, 2016; Shah, 2015; Al-Zeera, 2001; Lawson, 2005), this paper is intended to be a theoretical contribution to the study of religion in Britain.

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