**Project Title**  
**Becoming Muslim in Rural Leicestershire: An Oral History Project exploring Identity and Belonging**

**LEAD INSTITUTION**  
**Name of HEI institution**: Coventry University  
**Lead regional city**:  
- Birmingham ☐  
- Coventry ☒  
- Leicester ☐  
- Nottingham ☐

**PARTNER ORGANISATION**  
**Name of organisation**: Convert Muslim Foundation  
**URL for organisation website**: [https://www.convertmuslimfoundation.org.uk/](https://www.convertmuslimfoundation.org.uk/)

**THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

Oral history methods capture living histories to preserve the reflections, experiences, and voices of past events. This project will record and analyse the life stories of 30 Britons from Black, White and South Asian ethnic backgrounds who became Muslim during the period 1960 to 1990. Through analysis of these histories, individual negotiations around intersectional and ambivalent identity will be illuminated.

These identity negotiations took place against a backdrop of significant change in British Muslim communities. Migration from South Asia and the Caribbean meant that the nature of Islam in Britain was changing rapidly to incorporate the cultural and religious norms from migrants’ countries of origin. During this period, conversion to Islam also increased, catalysed by the increased visible presence of Islam in the UK. However, British converts faced a dual challenge of (not) belonging (Suleiman 2013, 2016). In adopting non-Christian practices, they didn’t fit into indigenous British communities who perceived their new religious status with suspicion or ridicule (Gilham 2014), but due to cultural differences struggled to find space within the new migrant Muslim communities.

Located in rural Leicestershire, the Convert Muslim Foundation (CMF) emerged in response to this milieu, to become a spiritual hub where British converts to Islam could gather to engage in discussions about their faith.

With a long-standing vision to record these stories, the Foundation retains vast databases and strong relationships with over 500 individuals who have joined since the 1990s. The vision is to share these stories to illuminate the societal contributions of these people who didn’t ‘quite fit’ but who nevertheless made significant contributions to British and British Muslim civil society and to learn from these stories to enhance the services that it provides to contemporary converts to Islam.

In relation to this project, Batool Al-toma the chair of the Convert Muslim Foundation UK, writes:

> Oral history can move, explain, excite, reveal, enrich, surprise and entertain. It can be a process of personalising the past and, in this particular case, making our convert Muslim heritage more appealing, understandable, enjoyable and inspirational. [...] As a result of economic migration in the 1950s and 60s there was a notable increase in conversion to Islam in the UK and it is this phenomena we wish to explore and record. As well as being recognised as a repository for stories that have cultural, artistic, aesthetic, and historical significance it is hoped the project will foster cultural pride in the information accrued and will serve as important research material to the future of Muslims in Britain.

Methodologically this project is underpinned by oral history approaches that record and preserve living history: people’s memories, feelings, attitudes to events and experiences of life matters (Ritchie 2014). In understanding religion as lived ‘embodied practices’, it will highlight the complex, untidy negotiations that take place in a person’s life to construct a religious identity, which may at times differ from official doctrine. In addition to collecting 30 oral histories, the project will also analyse CMF’s
significant archives and build spiritual inventories of the respondents. Dissemination and impact is central to this project. Dissemination plans include a radio show, presentations to various audiences and the possibility of using artefacts from the spiritual inventories to curate a pop-up exhibition on convert Muslim history in Britain.

The supervisory team for this project will consist of Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor (CTPSR, Coventry and internationally recognised scholar of British Muslim Studies and the current Chair of the Muslims in Britain Research Network), Batool Al-Toma (Founder and Chair of CMF, who is a walking-talking encyclopaedia on converts to Islam in Britain) and Alison Halford (who has significant expertise on lived religion and oral history). The project will be advised by Azeem Ahmed (Cardiff), a religious studies scholar with expertise in using oral history to explore Islam in Wales. In addition to a prestigious studentship, this project offers the opportunity to undertake collaborative research with a heretofore unheard group of people that will make a clear original contribution to knowledge. They will also become part of an enthusiastic team of academics and practitioners who lead their areas of expertise. This team has networks to aid the delivery of the project and the expertise to mentor an early career researcher. We welcome your interest in the project.

HOW TO FIND OUT MORE

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<th>Lead HEI Supervisor:</th>
<th>Dr Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor</th>
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