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Conversions to Islam and Identity Reconfigurations among Poles in Great Britain

Konrad Pędziwiatr
Department of European Studies
Cracow University of Economics
konrad.pedziwiatr@uek.krakow.pl

Abstract

In recent decades, a significant number of Polish citizens have not only left the country but also moved away from the religious traditions in which they were brought up. The article sheds light on the phenomenon of religious conversions and identity reconfigurations within the Polish community in Great Britain. It delves into the intricate processes of religious self-transformations and their impact on other forms of identity among Poles who have embraced Islam in the context of migration. It also assesses the processes of converts' distancing themselves from the elements of ethnicity and religion in which they were born and adopting new ones amid an atmosphere of increased anti-Muslim sentiments and stigmatisation. The paper draws from fieldwork data carried out amongst Polish Muslim converts living in different British cities between 2014 and 2016. It analyses their relations with the Polish community in the United Kingdom, the British Muslim population, as well as their larger sending and receiving societies. It argues that the processes of religious conversion and migration are frequently interrelated, as a significant proportion of the over 2,000 Polish Muslims in Britain embraced Islam either after their arrival in the country or elsewhere before coming to the UK. The paper also shows how the change of religious identity leads to the adoption of new traditions and habits and to a process of at least partial distancing from non-Muslim relatives and elements of non-Muslim Polish culture. The converts thus engage in construction of hybrid identities, linking elements of Polishness with super-diverse British Muslimness.

Keywords: migration, conversions to Islam, identity reconfigurations, Poland, Great Britain
Słowa kluczowe: migracja, konwersja na islam, zmiany tożsamościowe, Polska, Wielka Brytania

The Catholic Church maintains a strong position in Poland, and continues to play an important role in the public and private lives of Poles. This applies not only to those who live in Poland – where 88% of the population and 96% of the people that

answered the religious question in the last census belong to the Catholic Church[1] and around 40% of the society regularly participate in religious services[2] – but also to more than two and a half million citizens who have left the country in the last two decades and live in another European country, the most popular being the United Kingdom (788,000 Poles), Germany (687,000), the Netherlands (116,000) and Ireland (112,000).[3] Churches frequented by Polish migrants abroad not only serve religious roles, but also have numerous other social functions.[4] At the same time, the processes of migration have a significant impact on Polish religious identities. Some taken-for-granted elements of religious self-definition in the homeland assume a new shape in changed socio-cultural contexts, while others are contested as some migrants embrace new religions and embark on a process of religious learning and identity renewal. Sometimes the embracing of a new religion also acts as the main stimulus that encourages individuals to move to a different location within a given country or outside of it.

Amongst the key factors that influence (macro and micro) religious change in the context of migration are the size of the immigrant community, the scale of its dispersion, the character of the immigrant community (e.g. urban or rural), the expectations and intentions of migrants, and the wider socio-cultural, religious, legal and political context of a receiving country.[5] As various researchers have shown, the religious dimensions of the sending countries[6] also impact the scale of religious change in the process of migration. The wider contexts of migration are therefore crucial elements that need to be taken into account while analysing the process of religious change and identity reconfigurations among Polish converts to Islam in Great Britain.

This article sheds light on the emergence over the last decades of a small but vocal group of Muslim converts within the larger Polish community in Great Britain and identity reconfigurations within it. Using data from fieldwork conducted amongst Muslim converts within the Polish community in the United Kingdom, the paper

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[1] GUS, *Ludność. Stan i struktura demograficzno-społeczna. Narodowy Spis Powszechny Ludności i Mieszkań 2011*, Warszawa 2013.

[2] J. Czapiński, T. Panek, *Diagnoza społeczna 2015*, Warszawa 2015; ISKK, *Dominicantes 2014*, Warszawa 2015, www.iskk.pl; K. Pędziwiatr, *Church and State Relations in Poland with Special Focus on the Radio Station Mary* [in:] D. Westerlund, G. Simons (eds.), *Religion, Politics and Nation-Building in the Post-Communist Countries*, London 2015, pp. 163–178.

[3] GUS, *Informacja o rozmiarach i kierunkach emigracji z Polski w latach 2004–2016*, Warszawa 2017, https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/ludnosc/migracje-zagraniczne-ludnosci/informacja-o-rozmiarach-i-kierunkach-emigracji-z-polski-w-latach-20042016,2,10.html [access: 11.12.2017].

[4] H. Kubiak, *The Polish National Catholic Church in the United States of America from 1897 to 1980*, Kraków 1982; J. Marzec, *The Role of the Polish Roman Catholic Church in the Polish Community of the UK – A Study in Ethnic Identity and Religion*, Leeds 1988; A. Romejko, *Duszpasterstwo polonijne w Wielkiej Brytanii*, Tuchów 2001; J. Krotofil, *Religia w procesie kształtowania tożsamości polskich migrantów w Wielkiej Brytanii*, Kraków 2013.

[5] K. Knott, *The Religions of South Asian Communities in Britain* [in:] J. Hinnells (ed.), *A New Handbook of Living Religions*, London 1997; J. Waardenburg, *L'Islam et l'articulation d'identités musulmanes*, "Social Compass" 1994, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 21–33.

[6] M. Trzebiatowska, *The Advent of the 'EasyJet Priest': Dilemmas of Polish Catholic Integration in the UK*, "Sociology" 2010, vol. 44, no. 6, pp. 1055–1072; J. Cesari, *Religion and Diasporas: Challenges of the Emigration Countries*, INTERACT Research Report 2013/1, San Domenico di Fiesole 2013.

portrays some of the features of their relations with the Polish community in Britain, their new religious community and the sending and receiving societies. Some of the patterns of post-migration adaptation to the new society and religious conversion observed among Poles might also be extended to other groups of migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (hereafter CEE), who also experienced dynamic processes of migration after the accession to the European Union in 2004.

The paper is divided into three major parts. In the first, it makes some general remarks on the relations between migration and religion and its profound change in the form of conversion. It also clarifies the meaning of the term "conversion" as it is used in the text and the notion of identity, which undergoes a significant reconfiguration in the process of conversion.

The second part of the paper briefly sheds light on key features of the ethno-religious diversity and Muslim minorities of Poland and Great Britain (the sending and receiving societies) and describes the general characteristics of the Polish Muslim community in Britain. It also briefly analyses the conversion and migration nexus.

The final and longest part explores various dimensions of identity reconfigurations amongst Polish Muslim converts as a result of the exclusion they undergo in not only the sending but also the host society, and the converts' decisions to distance themselves from some elements of these societies. Building on fieldwork data, the section deals, inter alia, with the double stigmatisation and racialisation of Polish converts as Muslims within the Polish community in Britain and in Britain at large. Apart from that, and particularly in the Brexit context,[7] they might also be subject to discrimination by the host society as members of the Polish minority in the UK; however, this dimension of exclusion falls beyond the thematic scope and time framework of this paper.

The article is based on 2011 Census data on the religious affiliation of UK residents,[8] content analysis of Muslim and Muslim converts' websites[9] and respective social media pages, and fieldwork carried out between February 2014 and April 2016, mainly during three two-week stays in different parts of Britain (London, Birmingham and Warwick). It involved participant observation at meetings of Polish Muslim converts and in-depth interviews with 12 of them – seven women and five men. While all the men converted to Islam in Poland or elsewhere and then came to the UK, most female interviewees converted to Islam while living in Great Britain. Hence, half of my interviewees were converts who had undergone a process of profound religious change while living in the UK, and half had embraced Islam outside of the UK. Two of my participants had been living in Great Britain for less than two years at the time when I interviewed them, while the rest had lived in the country for longer periods (usually between three to six years) and did not plan to return to

[7] This refers to the surge of attacks on Poles in the UK in the aftermath of the June 2016 referendum on Britain's future in the European Union.

[8] ONS, *CT0265 – Country of Birth by Year of Arrival by Religion*, Office for National Statistics 2014.

[9] www.islam.fora.pl, alejkumki.blogspot.com, alejkumki.com, www.kobietywiary.org, www.planetaislam.com and their respective social media pages.

Poland in the near future. All female interviewees wore headscarves during our meetings, and two of the interviews were carried out in the company of a female friend of the interviewee. All the names of the interviewees that appear in the text have been changed in order to protect their anonymity.

Migration and religious change

Religious change has always been linked to human mobility. This is particularly clearly visible in the history of Islam itself, where the migration of the Prophet and his followers from Mecca to Medina (Hijra – 622) marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar and is linked with the formation of a distinctive religious community and crystallisation of Islamic rituals and dogmas, in particular as a result of contact with Medina Jews. As Ira Lapidus points out, for Muslims the word *hijra* (in Arabic: migration, the flight of the Prophet and his followers from Mecca to Yathrib – Medina) has come to mean not only a change of place, but "the adoption of Islam and entry into the community of Muslims (...) transition from the pagan to the Muslim world – from kinship to a society based on common belief."[10] Before moving to Medina and in the initial period of being there, Muhammad wanted to include Jews (as well as Christians) in his nascent community; however, their rejection of his Prophethood resulted in Islamic bypassing of Jewish and Christian scriptural legacy and formation of a distinct religion superseding Judaism and Christianity.[11]

The relationship between migration and religious transformation seems particularly relevant in our contemporary age of migration,[12] when even the most distant parts of the world are interconnected in a complex web of relations and at a time when one may observe intensification, diversification, feminisation and growing politicisation of human mobility. In an age of increased mobility, it is increasingly important to view religious conversions as closely linked with this fluid mobility within state borders and outside them.

The processes of migration lead to significant changes in the religious composition of many contemporary societies including European ones (the emergence of large Muslim populations in Western Europe after World War II, for instance, is viewed by some scholars as the largest religious change in Europe since the Reformation.[13] They also have an impact on religions themselves and various aspects of people's religiosity, understood here as the wide range of forms and manifestations of the personal belief that "death does not imply the automatic annihilation of the individual self."[14]

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[10] I.M. Lapidus, *History of Islamic Societies*, Cambridge 1988, p. 27.

[11] *Ibidem*, p. 28.

[12] S. Castles, J.M. Miller, *The Age of Migration. International Population Movements in the Modern World*, New York 2003.

[13] P. Lewis, *Muslims in Europe: Managing Multiple Identities and Learning Shared Citizenship*, "Political Theology" 2005, vol. 6, no. 3, p. 200.

[14] E. Leach, *Culture and Communication: the Logic by Which Symbols Are Connected*, Cambridge 1976.

The growing diversity of migratory flows, the issues emerging from increasing religious pluralism, and a more general awakening of interest in religion worldwide are only some of the factors that have given rise to renewed attention to the relationship between migration and religion, and especially the impact of a given religious identification on the process of post-migration integration.

Migration means at least partial social and cultural uprooting, and forces migrants to recreate their social worlds in new spaces. In the new socio-cultural environments, religious ideas and practices once taken for granted also need to be rethought and often re-established from scratch, since they lack their former legitimisation and basis. While revitalising their religiosity, immigrants need to take into account the meanings their beliefs and practices connote in the ethno-religious environments of their host societies.[15] The shape of migrants' religiosity in the new society depends largely on a mixture of pre-migration, migration and post-migration factors.[16] Previous literature has also established that the role of religion in interactions between the sending and receiving countries depends on such elements as: the pre-existing political and religion status of religion in the emigration country, the strength of connection between religion and national identity, the respective countries' mutual perception of emigration and immigration, the influence of transnational religious movements and the socio-economic distance between the emigration and immigration country.[17]

All the aforementioned variables have to be taken into account in the analysis of post-migration religious change, while remembering that today's human mobility and religiosity are increasingly fluid, and hence it should no longer be assumed that religions and cultures are nationally grounded, that they are fixed, nor that individuals and groups organise themselves only within national borders.[18] At the same time, one needs to admit that the cultural foundations of nation states have not been significantly shaken, and that religion, albeit increasingly secularised in many societies, continues to play an important role in them and be a key element of the cultural landscape.[19] Thus, while some may have thought that, in the age of globalisation, religious identities would fade away, on the contrary they continue to be viewed as

[15] M. Martiniello, J. Rath, *An Introduction to International Migration Studies*, Amsterdam 2012, IMISCOE Textbooks, http://books.google.pl/books?id=OtAjAwAAQBAJ [access: 1.12.2017]; J. Waardenburg, *op.cit.*; P. Werbner, *Imagined Diasporas Among Manchester Muslims*, Oxford 2002.

[16] K. Pędziwiatr, *Od Islamu imigrantów do islamu obywateli: muzułmanie w krajach Europy Zachodniej*, Kraków 2007.

[17] J. Cesari, *op.cit.*

[18] A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis 1997; D. Held, *The Global Transformations Reader*, Cambridge 2000; O. Roy, *Globalized Islam – The Search for a New Ummah*, New York 2004.

[19] This is particularly the case in Poland, where Catholicism is a key element of the modern Polish national identity which initially developed in the absence of the state (1795–1918) and in opposition to occupying foreign powers viewed as religiously alien (especially Orthodox Russia and Protestant Prussia). After the re-emergence of Poland on the maps of Europe, the apparatus of the state became actively involved in popularisation of the Pole-Catholic identity, which survived the Communist repressions, and was particularly strongly revived around 1989 when the Church, aligned with the Solidarity movement, celebrated victory over Communism – more in M. Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna* [Amazing Slavdom], Kraków 2006; M. Łuczewski, *Odwieczny naród. Polak i katolik w Żmiącej* [Eternal Nation. Pole and Catholic in Żmiąca], Toruń 2012.

crucial unspoken building blocks for national identities. This is why, as Özyurek (2009) rightly points out, the idea of choosing a new religion, especially a minority religion, is frequently viewed as a form of national betrayal.[20] She convincingly argues that, while until the first half of the twentieth century, mixed-race unions were conceived as the greatest threat to the biological purity of the superior race and nations, in the twenty-first century it is religious converts, and particularly Muslim ones, that are seen as dangerous hybrids, polluting and challenging the cultural purity of dominant groups in a given political unit.[21] As this paper will argue, Polish Muslim converts in Britain are viewed as double suspects, not only in their host society but also in their own ethnic community (while abroad, or the home society while being in Poland), and are thus twice stigmatised and racialised.

Religious identities that were once tightly connected to specific ethnic communities are today increasingly detached from them and embraced by members of the outgroup. At the same time, migrants are no longer exclusively linked to one locality, and may be active in the economic, social and political lives of their home countries while simultaneously establishing themselves in their new host countries, thereby overcoming the burden of "double absence."[22] The growing importance of transnational ties between migrants and their less mobile significant others in the sending country also means that migration transforms not only migrants but also, increasingly, the lives of individuals who stay at home.[23] As numerous researchers exploring social remittances have shown, the transfer of values and social habits has been increasingly occurring in deterritorialised "virtual" spaces,[24] and this transnational process also affects religious beliefs and practices.[25] Gawlewicz and Narkowicz[26] make the important observation that, with the increased migration flows, Islamophobic attitudes also circulate between national contexts.[27] One of my interviewees even argued that "Islamophobia in Poland is to a large extent an import of anti-Muslim narratives by Poles living abroad for an extended period of time and returning back to the country or travelling between the countries [the sending and receiving ones]" (Ameer, 33, translator, Muslim for 10 years).

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[20] E. Öyzurek, *Convert Alert: German Muslims and Turkish Christians as Threats to Security in the New Europe*, "Comparative Studies in Society and History" 2009, vol. 51, no. 1, p. 107.

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 95.

[22] A. Sayad, *La Double absence: des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré*, Paris 1999.

[23] S. Vertovec, *Transnationalism*, Routledge 2009.

[24] See for example P. Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers*, Berkeley 2001.

[25] See for example I. Grabowska, M.P. Garapich, *Social Remittances and Intra-EU Mobility: Non-financial Transfers Between U.K. and Poland*, "Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies" 2016, vol. 42, no. 13, pp. 2146–2162.

[26] A. Gawlewicz, K. Narkowicz, *Islamophobia on the Move: Circulation of Anti-Muslim Prejudice Between Poland and the UK* [in:] Y. Suleiman (ed.), *Muslims in the UK and Europe I*, Cambridge 2015.

[27] For more examples of this phenomenon see K. Pędziwiatr, *Islamophobia in Poland: National Report 2016* [in:] F. Hafez, E. Bayrakli (eds.), *European Islamophobia Report 2016*, Istanbul 2017, pp. 411–443.

Conversions and identity reconfigurations

In this paper, the notion of conversion is broadly understood as "a change (of diverse intensity but usually profound[28]) in religious beliefs and behaviour."[29] At the same time, I acknowledge the fact that for some Muslim converts this concept can be controversial, as they may not see themselves as converts, but rather as reverts, or as Muslims who only recently rediscovered the faith "that was always in them."[30] Joanna (32, childcarer, Muslim for 9 years), for example, recalled that from a very early age she had felt a special inclination towards sacredness – first in its Christian version and later on in its "proper" Islamic interpretation. "My mother laughs even today when she recounts the stories of me praying in front of every cross I noticed (...) I believe this was an early manifestation of fitra," Joanna says. The concept of *fitra*, usually understood in Islamic theology as the primordial human nature or special religious instinct that leads human beings to the Oneness of God, was mentioned by many other interviewees (e.g. Piotr, 33, translator, Muslim for 16 years, or Aneta, 36, accountant, Muslim for 8 years). Like the narratives of Eastern Orthodox converts collected by Winchester,[31] my interviewees described in their accounts how they had progressively discovered, reclaimed, and cultivated a latent Islamic self that was retrospectively viewed as part of their lives all along. By stressing *fitra*, they de-emphasised discontinuity (in the form of embracing of Islam affecting almost all aspects of their lives) in favour of elements of continuity.

The term "conversion" is also used in the text to describe interconnected processes which lead to a gradual reorganisation of self. As Joanna Krotofil aptly notices, this conceptualisation of religious change avoids imposing unjustified uniformity and radical reductionism on converts' experiences, and acknowledges that there are different versions of Islam which people embrace.[32] This is evident in the light of the fieldwork material gathered for this paper, which is a collection of diverse stories of conversion. Yet these unique stories do have some elements in common, and these will be elaborated in greater depth below.

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[28] As Elżbieta Hałas points out, the profoundness of religious change is one of the few elements about the process of conversion on which sociologists generally agree – see E. Hałas, *Konwersja. Perspektywa socjologiczna*, Warszawa 2007.

[29] H. Grzymała-Moszczyńska, *Religia a kultura. Wybrane zagadnienia z kulturowej psychologii religii*, Kraków 2004, p. 116.

[30] J.D. Woodberry, *Conversion in Islam* [in:] H.N. Malony, S. Southard (eds.), *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, Birmingham 1992; N. Bourque, *How Deborah Became Aisha: The Conversion Process and the Creation of Female Muslim Identity* [in:] K. van Nieuwkerk (ed.), *Women Embracing Islam*, Austin 2006.

[31] D. Winchester, *Converting to Continuity: Temporality and Self in Eastern Orthodox Conversion Narratives*, "Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion" 2015, vol. 54, no. 3, pp. 439–460.

[32] J. Krotofil, *'If I am to Be a Muslim. I Have to Be a Good One'. Polish Migrant Women Embracing Islam and Reconstruction Identities in Dialogue with Self and Others* [in:] K. Górak-Sosnowska (ed.), *Muslims in Poland and Eastern Europe. Widening the European Discourse on Islam*, Warszawa 2011, pp. 154–168; *eadem*, *Religia w procesie kształtowania...*

One of the elements that all conversion narratives have in common is accounts of the profound identity reconfigurations that people embracing Islam undergo. Before some of the main patterns of these reconfigurations are assessed, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the term "identity" as used in the text. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim make the important argument that identity in high modernity is a reflexive project which aims at sustaining coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives. They also stress that contemporary "do-it-yourself biographies" are also "risk biographies," which can swiftly turn into "breakdown biographies," if the wrong choice of career field is compounded by the downward spiral of private misfortune.[33] In this text, identity is understood, following the author of *The Information Age*, as "a process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes that is given priority over other sources of meaning,"[34] and where meaning is defined as "the symbolic identification by a social actor of the purpose of her/his actions."[35] It is important to add to this definition the situational character of such a process of meaning construction and its multidimensionality.

Diversity of the sending and receiving societies and interrelation between conversion and migration

Both the Polish and the British societies under consideration here are ethnically and religiously heterogeneous, and include Muslim minorities in their midst. The Polish society, however, is significantly less diverse than the British one. While before the Second World War it was made up of less than 70% of ethnic Poles, with significant Ukrainian, Jewish, Byelorussian and German minorities, at present more than 95% of citizens of the country are ethnic Poles.[36] Poland is also one of the least religiously diverse countries in the European Union. The largest religious minorities are the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church and Jehovah's Witnesses, whereas the Muslim community makes up, according to expert estimations,[37] between 25,000 and 35,000 believers (which is less than 0.1% of the total population), or 5,108,[38] according to a recent Central Statistical Office of Poland report.[39] While for almost six centuries the entire Muslim community in Poland consisted of Tatars, this situation altered

[33] U. Beck, E. Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences*, SAGE 2002, p. 3.

[34] M. Castells, *The Power of Identity*, Oxford 1997, p. 6.

[35] *Ibidem*, p. 7.

[36] GUS, *Struktura narodowo-etniczna, językowa i wyznaniowa ludności Polski*, Warszawa 2015.

[37] A. Nalborczyk, *Mosques in Poland. Past and Present* [in:] K. Górak-Sosnowska (ed.), *Muslims in Poland and Eastern Europe. Widening the European Discourse on Islam*, Warszawa 2011; K. Pędziwiatr, *Imigranci bliskowschodni i północnoafrykańscy a odrodzenie islamu we współczesnej Polsce* [in:] R. Kusek (ed.), *Czy Polska leży nad Morzem Śródziemnym?*, Kraków 2012, pp. 240–265.

[38] GUS, *Struktura narodowo-etniczna...*, *op.cit.*

[39] The figure for Muslims in Poland provided by the 2015 GUS report takes into account only organised Muslims or members of the officially recognised Muslim organisations in the country, and not religious as well as ethno-cultural Muslims who are not members of these organisations.

radically after World War II. This was, firstly, because large parts of the pre-war Polish Tatar community, whose centre was in Vilnius, found themselves outside of the new state boundaries, and secondly, as a result of immigration and religious conversions.

Although immigration to Communist Poland from "friendly" Muslim countries like Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Jordan and Tunisia[40] was limited and the majority of Muslim students returned back home after their studies, some decided to stay in Poland, found jobs and started families, thus becoming the pioneers of the immigrant Muslim community in Poland. Today, the Tatars are only a small minority (less than 5,000 people) within the wider Polish Muslim community. The remaining majority (between 20,000 to 30,000 people) is a very diverse group comprising former and current students, professionals, members of the diplomatic corps, economic migrants, refugees and, last but not least, Poles who have converted to Islam.[41]

British society is significantly much more diverse in ethnic and religious terms than Polish society, and, particularly importantly here, it is home to a sizable Muslim population. According to the 2011 Census, which for the second time (after the 2001 edition) included a question on religious identity,[42] nearly 5% of the population of the country, that is 2.7 million people, describe themselves as Muslims (Office of National Statistics – hereafter ONS).[43] British Islam has a visible South Asian character, with large numbers of Muslims originating from Pakistan (slightly over a million), Bangladesh (402,000) and India (almost 200,000). Taken together, Muslims of South Asian origin – over 50% of whom were born in the UK – constitute three quarters (1.8 million) of the adherents of Islam in Britain.[44]

The British Muslim population has grown significantly since 2001, when it was only 1.6 million people. The growth over the last decade does not result only from slightly higher than average fertility rates, and relatively young communities, but is also due to immigration. Some 188,000 Pakistani citizens and 70,000 Bangladeshi citizens settled in the UK between 2001 and 2011.[45] Moreover, the last decade has

[40] M. Chilczuk, *Foreigners Studying in Poland: A Fifty Year Perspective*, 2001, http://www.copernicus.org.pl/kontakt/chilczuk_a.htm [access: 11.10.2016]; P. Gasztold-Seń, *Arabscy studenci w Warszawie po 1956 r.* [in:] P. Pleskot (ed.), *Cudzoziemcy w Warszawie 1945–1989. Studia i materiały*, Warszawa 2012, pp. 240–265.

[41] One of the largest groups of Muslim professionals to have arrived in Poland in recent decades is Turks. I. Koryś, O. Żuchaj, *Turkish Migratory Flows to Poland: General Description*, Warsaw 2000; K. Pędziwiatr, *Turkish Community in Poland: from Textile Vendors to Top Managers* [in:] K. Kujawa (ed.), *Polish-Turkish Foreign Policy: 600 Years of Bilateral Relations*, Çanakkale University Publishing House 2014, while the largest group among Muslim refugees are Chechens. H. Grzymała-Moszczyńska, M. Trojanek, *Image of the World and Themselves Built by Young Chechens Living in Polish Refugee Centers. Intercultural Conflict* [in:] K. Górak-Sosnowska (ed.), *Muslims in Poland and Eastern Europe Widening the European Discourse on Islam*, Warszawa 2011, pp. 69–88.

[42] The question, which in England and Wales was voluntary, was nevertheless answered by 92% of people.

[43] If not stated otherwise, the statistical information concerning Muslims in Britain comes from the Office for National Statistics http://www.statistics.gov.uk or the General Register Office, Scotland http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk.

[44] MCB, *British Muslims in Numbers*, London 2015.

[45] ONS, *op.cit*.

witnessed a significant increase in immigrants and refugees from Iraq (42,000), Afghanistan (41,000) and Somalia (58,000). In addition, it is noteworthy that 10% of Muslims in Britain are black, the majority of whom (7.7%) have African roots.[46]

The Muslim population in the UK also includes a sizeable and growing number of people who have converted to Islam. According to expert estimations, this group, which consisted of around 60,000 people in 2001, a decade later comprised more than 100,000 people.[47] One of the census categories that includes a significant number of Muslim converts is "White British and Irish." There were almost 80,000 people who identified themselves as such in 2011.

Muslim converts from Poland and Central and Eastern Europe are usually registered in the category "Other White," which totals 131,000 people.[48] A careful analysis of the 2011 Census religious data reveals that among the almost one million people from CEE who have migrated to Great Britain in the last two decades,[49] there were 2,282 Polish, 581 Lithuanian, 437 Slovak, 375 Latvian, 373 Czech, 340 Hungarian and 67 Estonian followers of Islam. In total, the group of CEE Muslims in Britain is made up of 4,455 people. While some members of this group belong to autochthonous Muslim communities in their respective countries or are naturalised Muslim immigrants or their offspring, a significant proportion (more than 50%, according to our interviews with Polish Muslims, and British Muslim community leaders and experts[50]), consists of people who adopted the Muslim faith before or after settling in Britain, and the majority of them being women. Thus, they add to the larger group of "white" Muslim converts mentioned above.

The research data shows that experiences of religious conversion and migration in the analysed group were closely linked and bore some similarities with the experiences of the first Muslims and their travel from Mecca to Medina in 622, as mentioned above. Embracing Islam acted either as a key factor that pushed certain individuals to move abroad and develop their religiosity further or constituted a key consequence of this mobility. The gathered material also points to some interesting gender differences in the experiences of mobility and conversion, yet these should not be overgeneralised, taking into account the qualitative nature of the analysed case.

For the majority of the interviewed male converts, the decision to leave Poland was directly linked with their embracing a new faith and desire "to learn more about Islam from Muslims themselves" (Piotr, 33, translator, Muslim for 16 years), "to learn Arabic" (Mirek, 27, Muslim for 3 years) or "to improve religious knowledge" (Ameer, 33, translator, Muslim for 10 years). They became Muslim while still in Poland, and then travelled to the Middle East (Turkey, Yemen) or to the West (France,

[46] MCB, *op.cit*.

[47] K. Brice, *A Minority within a Minority: A Report on Converts to Islam in the United Kingdom*, Swansea 2011; J. Suleiman, *Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Female Perspectives*, Cambridge 2013.

[48] ONS, *op.cit.*

[49] It is to be noted that within this group, Poland provided the largest number of immigrants – almost 600,000 immigrants according to ONS 2014.

[50] Interviews with, inter alia, Dr Abdullah al Faliq from the Cordoba Foundation, Dr Jamil Sherif from the Muslim Council of Britain and Dilwar Hussain from New Horizons in British Islam.

UK) mainly for religious reasons. Sometimes, as in the case of Mirek, who complained that in the part of London where he lived he had not yet managed to meet a single Arab, this mobility was not fully living up to their expectations, and hence they considered changing their migration strategy (Mirek, for instance, planning to go to Egypt). For one of my male interviewees, however, the main reason for coming to Britain was similar to that of the vast majority of Poles in the country, i.e. economic. However, he pointed out that he had relied heavily on the religious network to find work and accommodation in the UK.

Almost all the researched women had come to Britain for educational, economic, family or other reasons (or for many reasons at once), yet as non-Muslims and during their encounters with members of the local Islamic communities had developed an interest in Islam and then decided to embrace the new faith. The experience of leaving the old socio-cultural environments and entering new spaces of cultural and religious exchange freed them at least partially from the cultural elements of social control of the home society and opened to them the spectrum of new ideas, habits and norms, including religious ones. Several interviewees pointed out that living in Britain "opened their eyes to the beauty of Islam," which they would never have had the chance to discover while living in Poland (e.g. Gosia, 31, fundraiser, Muslim for 4 years, and Katarzyna, 35, shop assistant, Muslim for 5 years). At first glance, their religious self-transformations bear many features of "relational" conversions, whereas the earlier ones are "rational," ones as defined by Stefano Allievi.[51] At the same time, closer analysis, for which we do not have time here, shows that their conversion histories defy such narrow categorisations.

Stigmatisation and racialisation of the Muslim converts

One of the common elements of both the UK and CEE social landscapes is that in both spaces, over the last decades Islam has become one of the most important symbols of the "Other." The views of the general public are saturated with Orientalist ideas and increasing Islamophobia.[52] Although Muslims have been living within Polish territory for over six centuries, they are not necessarily a welcomed group. Rising levels of anti-Muslim sentiments have been experienced not only by Muslims in Poland,[53] but also by Polish converts to Islam interviewed in the UK. The Islamophobic portrayal of Muslims and Islam in the Polish public sphere has become increasingly mainstream over the last years[54] and, as a CBOS study from 2015 shows, public perception of

[51] S. Allievi, *Les convertis à l'islam: les nouveaux musulmans d'Europe*, Paris 1999.

[52] C. Allen, *Islamophobia*, Farnham 2010; K. Pędziwiatr, *Islamophobia as a New Manifestation of Polish Fears and Anxieties* [in:] R. Kusek, J. Purchla, J. Sanetra-Szeliga (eds.), *Nations and Stereotypes Twenty Five Years After: New Borders, New Horizons*, Kraków 2015.

[53] K. Pędziwiatr, *Islamophobia as a New Manifestation of Polish Fears and Anxieties*.

[54] K. Pędziwiatr, *Islamophobia in Poland: National Report 2015* [in:] F. Hafez, E. Bayrakli (eds.), *European Islamophobia Report 2015*, Istanbul 2016.

Islam and Muslims is very negative.[55] Although with lower hostility than the Polish society, Britons also view Muslims, and particularly converts, with growing fear and suspicion.[56] They are viewed through the prism of essentialised collective categories that erase all forms of internal diversity of Muslims and play down their individual identities. In this way, Islam ceases to be a religion and transforms into a culture. As Monika Bobako rightly points out, whenever the Muslim "culture" is conceived in such an over-deterministic and highly essentialised way – hence becoming the de facto equivalent of biologically understood race – one may talk about anti-Muslim cultural racism.[57] This form of racism is closely linked with anti-Semitism, which also sees the Jews through the prism of "Otherness" framed in Orientalistic language,[58] and frequently uses conspiracy theories claiming that Jews and Muslims want in some way to dominate the majoritarian groups, and that this will inevitably lead to Judaisation or Islamisation of European societies.

Converts from Poland and other CEE countries who settled in the UK have to negotiate their Muslim identity not only within the host society, which is increasingly hostile towards Islam (especially after 7/7 and other terrorist attacks in Europe), but also within their respective ethnic communities in the UK and Poland, which hold similarly (if not more) negative views on Islam. They are in a sense doubly stigmatised and racialised: by their own home society (and diasporic community abroad) and by their host society. Not only their own compatriots, but also members of the British society perceive Islam in a highly essentialist way as a violent and oppressive religion, and also extend this perception of religion to their individual followers. Racialisation of the converts takes place as racial meaning is assigned to a group that was previously defined in religious terms, and it is associated with a number of phenotypical and cultural characteristics that are deemed unchanging and hereditary.[59] These processes have been thoroughly explored with regard to different groups of converts by Leon Moosavi[60] and Juliette Galonnier.[61] They show, inter alia, that converts, due to their intimate and usually more frequent contacts with non-Muslims, are very well placed to expose the subtle as well as sometimes blatant Islamophobia that is generated in these kinds of interactions.

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[55] CBOS, *Postawy wobec islamu i muzułmanów* [Attitudes towards Islam and Muslims], Warszawa 2015.

[56] A. Zick, B. Küpper, A. Hövermann, *Intolerence, Prejudice and Descrimination: A European Report*, 2011.

[57] M. Bobako, *Rasa i religia. Trajektorie antysemityzmu i islamofobii*, "Tematy z Szewskiej" 2014, vol. 3(13), pp. 37–56.

[58] S. Sayyid, *A Measure of Islamophobia*, "Islamophobia Studies Journal" 2014, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 10–25.

[59] N. Meer, T. Modood, *The Racialisation of Muslims* [in:] A.K. Vakil, B. Sayyid (eds.), *Thinking through Islamophobia*, London 2010, pp. 69–83; J. Galonnier, *The Racialization of Muslims in France and the United States: Some Insights from White Converts to Islam*, "Social Compass" 2015, vol. 62, no. 4, pp. 570–583.

[60] L. Moosavi, *The Racialization of Muslim Converts in Britain and Their Experiences of Islamophobia*, "Critical Sociology" 2014, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 41–56.

[61] J. Galonnier, *The Racialization of Muslims in France and the United States: Some Insights from White Converts to Islam*, "Social Compass" 2015, vol. 62, no. 4.

One of my interviewees argued, for example, that "When I told members of my family and friends that I had become Muslim, our relations became increasingly difficult – for most of them Islam was only about stoning people or blowing them up" (Witek, 32, IT specialist, Muslim for 10 years). These kinds of views have had a clear impact on my interviewees. Their self-perception as victims living in an era of widespread Islamophobia was prevalent. Moreover, most of them saw Islamophobia as a part of their daily lives both in Poland and the Polish community in the UK and outside of it, and as something they had to deal with.

In line with the findings of some other research projects,[62] the fieldwork data shows that one of the groups particularly affected by Islamophobia was female converts. As all of them were veiled, and hence easily identifiable as members of the Muslim community, they had to go through more experiences of stigmatisation and racialisation than their male counterparts. This is particularly important since most converts from CEE are young (between 20 and 45 years old) and the majority of them are women (between 60 and 75%). As one of them recalled in the interview, "Before putting on a hijab I had no problems when travelling to Poland. Nobody noticed that I was a Muslim. The situation changed drastically when I put a hijab on. Even some of my closest friends did not want to interact with me" (Emilia, 32, accountant, Muslim for 6 years). She also argued that her decision to wear the *hijab* had had a negative effect on some of her relations with her local community in Britain. For example, she said that the employees of her local Polish shop became "super cold" to her.

The research material also shows the degree to which converts' relations with Poles in Poland and in the UK as well as with the wider British public are marked by Islamophobia, partially depending on what "kind of Islam" converts adopted and what their attitude towards their Polish socio-cultural background was. Those who embraced non-dialogical and highly conservative interpretations of Islam found it particularly difficult to maintain good contacts with their non-Muslim family members and friends in the home country as well as in the Polish diaspora. This was captured particularly well in the story of Joanna (32, childcarer, Muslim for 9 years), who said that "My hunger for knowledge and faith was so great that I have gone too far and this hugely interfered with my relations with my mother, who is the most important person for me. When I put on a niqab my mother almost had a stroke. I knew I had gone too far and that I needed to backtrack." As will be explored in more depth below, the converts who embrace Salafism (in contrast to those who choose more liberal interpretations of Islam) frequently find it more difficult to maintain contact not only with their Polish family and friends, but also with elements of Polishness in a broad sense.

Many other interviewees talked about the difficulty of maintaining relations with non-Muslim family members when they informed them about their conversion. One interviewee said that she had completely lost contact with her close family after her conversion (Beata, 34, housewife, Muslim for 8 years). Another stated that "when you accept Islam you gain many new friends and at the same time lose many old ones (...) with time, though, some of the old contacts can be re-established" (Aneta,

[62] More importantly J. Suleiman, *op.cit*.

36, accountant, Muslim for 8 years). While some other interviewees confirmed that they had managed to reconnect with family members who initially did not want to keep in touch with them, a few confessed that in their case, even the passage of time had not helped much. Joanna (32, childcarer, Muslim for 9 years) pointed out that "when I started to wear a hijab all my family started to worry. Every year my relations with my family become increasingly more difficult. For them Islam means only terrorism." Not surprisingly, some Polish Muslim converts hide the fact that they have embraced Islam from their families or their friends and colleagues. For instance, Mirek (27, odd jobs, Muslim for 3 years) said that "only my closest family and my partner know about my conversion. My grandfather and grandmother are very old and I wouldn't like to upset them. Besides, I know they would not understand my decision. For them Christianity is the only righteous faith."

Ambiguous relations towards different dimensions of Polishness

The aforementioned statements also show that for many Polish Muslims in the UK, conversion involves distancing themselves from their home country – not only geographically, which is an inevitable feature of migration, but also socially, culturally and psychologically. The rupture with previous beliefs also comes with a crucial modification of converts' social world. The Polish Muslim converts in the UK display a great deal of ambiguity in their relations with the home country. While on the one hand they try to distance themselves from Polishness, and especially its non-Muslim elements, on the other hand they often long for some aspects of it. This longing is clearly visible in the statements of Gosia (31), who said that "I miss Poland, and especially Polish high culture: theatre and literature," and Sarah (31), who pointed out that "for me keeping contact with Polishness and Polish culture is very important, and that is why at least three times a year I go to Poland." She adds, laughing, that her longing for Poland is now at least partially fulfilled by the Polish shops that have mushroomed in British cities since Poland's accession to the European Union.

In order to fulfil converts' need for Islam in the Polish language, some converts have also begun individual cooperation with the Polish Muslim Publishing House Averroes and mosques and Muslim organisations in Warsaw, Gdańsk and Wrocław, as well as taking steps towards socio-religious self-organisation. One of the important organisations which grew out of this milieu is the NGO Women of Faith (*Kobiety Wiary*), led by Polish female converts. Uniting around 300 Muslim women, mostly from Poland but also from other CEE countries, the NGO organises sociocultural, sporting and religious activities in order to improve women's well-being and strengthen the community. It aims to foster and encourage a support network for Muslim women and their families who are in distress and misfortune, as well as to empower Muslim women in the community by promoting their rights and developing a spirit of entrepreneurship (Women of Faith 2016). While striving to achieve these and other goals, Women of Faith cooperates with Muslim and non-Muslim organisations not only in the UK but also in Poland (e.g. the Muslim female organisation

Alejkumki – see www.alejkumki.com). At the same time, the organisation does not hide the fact that it wants to "spread information about Islam to others," or, in other words, preach Islam (*da'wah*) to Muslims and non-Muslims. What is interesting, though, and shows the intricate processes of converts distancing themselves from their home country's culture and ethnicity, while at the same time longing for it, is the emphasis Women of Faith put on cultivating the Polish culture and language. One of my interviewees who particularly cherished this aspect of the organisation was Joanna (32, childcarer, Muslim for 9 years), who argued that "From the beginning of activities at Kobiety Wiary, we emphasised the importance of talking about Islam and doing activities with Islam in Polish. I was extremely happy about it. I believed then and still believe it is badly needed... So that we do not lose our language and culture."

In the migrants' stories of profound religious change, one may also notice numerous elements of negotiation of their own cultural and religious past. They often expressed critical views on the dominant position of the Catholic Church in Poland and its hierarchical nature. They contrasted it with the absence of such an institution in Islam, and spoke highly of the fact that in their new faith, the access to the sacred is more "democratic" and, as Sarah (31, secretary, Muslim for 7 years) expressed it, there is "a feeling of closeness to God." Similarly to van Nieuwkerk's respondents, my interviewees constructed Islam as a rational, simple religion.[63] At the same time, for many converts, the fragmentation and internal diversity of Islam posed a significant challenge. Some had decided to search for assistance amongst other new Muslims and exchanged information and supported each other in learning how to become "good Muslims." They also set up or joined self-support groups and organisations (e.g. the aforementioned Women of Faith). The continuous search for answers, especially in the early phases of conversion, was one of the reasons explaining the popularity of all kinds of Islamic websites (not only in Polish) amongst Polish converts (e.g. www.islam.fora.pl).

The fact of conversion to Islam and where it took place (in Poland, UK or elsewhere) are less significant in accounting for converts' self-transformation than the "type" of Islam they choose to adopt. There are many paths to Islam, and it is important which one a given individual takes. Fieldwork in different locations in the UK has shown that a significant proportion of Polish converts adopt literalist, Salafi Islam, rather than its less dogmatically and orthopraxically rigid traditional version. Many of them behave similarly to the Danish converts researched by Jensen, who "often exhibit a kind of fanaticism with their new religion, which is generally expressed with very ritualized behaviour, such as taking on the entire Islamic dress code and forming a preoccupation with Islamic rules of what is haram (forbidden) and halal (allowed), of doing things right."[64]

Joanna (32, childcarer, Muslim for 9 years) was one of the Polish converts who adopted this kind of Islam, and eventually decided to become "more relaxed" about

[63] K. van Nieuwkerk (ed.), *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, Austin 2006.

[64] T.G. Jensen, *Religious Authority and Autonomy Intertwined: The Case of Converts to Islam in Denmark*, "The Muslim World" 2006, vol. 96, no. 4, p. 646.

her faith when she noticed that it had led to her exclusion from the world. She said that "with time Salafi orthopraxy began to bother me, and the discovery of Tariq Ramadan became like a lotion after Salafism." Some other converts, for example Aneta (36, accountant, Muslim for 8 year), cherished their new faith so much that they were even ready to sacrifice relations with their closest family members for it. The popularity of Salafism among Polish converts was one of the reasons why some who adopted other versions of Islam found it difficult to relate to their compatriots. One of them was Piotr (33, translator, Muslim for 16 years), who said that "I have problems with Polish Salafists – there are quite a number of them in the local mosque where you can hear a lot about kuffa, bidʿa and shirk.[65] Most of the people in this mosque never smile. It is a sad place that I do not want to have anything to do with." Another interviewee, Wojciech (40, handyman, Muslim for 10 years), in a similar vein argued that "the aggressiveness of the Salafi discourse and the people who have adopted it is something that puts me off them." Even Joanna (32, child-carer, Muslim for 9 years), who, at a certain point of her "conversion career,"[66] felt "attracted" to literalist interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah, pointed out that she did not like it when Salafi scholars argue that Islam is one and that the whole cultural context can be cut from it. "For me you also have to keep in Islam elements of culture (...) religion needs culture, in the same way as a tree needs roots and soil," she argued.

In spite of the experiences of Islamophobia in the UK, the vast majority of my interviewees spoke with much more affection about their receiving society than about Poland. They particularly cherished the multicultural dimension of the British society and the institutional base for Islam in the country. Joanna (32) claimed that "I rather rule out the option of returning to Poland. Here, in the UK being a female Muslim is much easier. Here is Mecca... even in comparison to France." Similar opinions were also expressed by some of my male interviewees. Mirek (27, odd jobs, Muslim for 3 years) argued that "Life for a Muslim is much easier in Britain. There are plenty of mosques, easy access to halal food and plenty of opportunities to improve religious knowledge. In Poland this is not the case." Another, Piotr (33), pointed out that "Practising Islam in Britain is much easier than in Poland." For the aforementioned reasons, most of the Polish converts interviewed in the course of the research did not plan to return to Poland in the near future. It was clear that not only religious, but also economic factors played a role in these decisions, as Polish converts were aware of the fact that in Poland they would not receive salaries comparable to those obtained in the UK.

Conclusions

As this paper has shown, some of the Poles who have settled in the UK in recent years have not only moved away from their former country to a new one but have also shifted from previous religious beliefs towards new ones. This article argued

[65] Islamic terms for respectively: non-Muslims/apostates, foreign/innovative elements in Islam and the sin of practising idolatry or polytheism.

[66] *Conversion Careers*, J.T. Richardson (ed.), Beverly Hills 1978.

that a significant proportion of the 2,282 Polish Muslims in England and Wales detected by the 2011 Census data embraced Islam either after their arrival in Britain or elsewhere before coming to the UK. Their conversion usually involved the process of distancing themselves from non-Muslim relatives and some elements of a largely non-Muslim Polish culture. As shown above, however, most of the converts do not want to, or cannot, detach themselves completely from the socio-cultural heritage in which they grew up. Migrant converts often long for at least some elements of the world they have left behind and engage in the construction of hybrid identities. Polish Muslims and other CEE migrants in the UK have access to a vibrant cultural contact zone where Western and Islamic values penetrate and infuse each other, thereby providing them with a fruitful social and cultural ground for the creation of such hybrid selves.

So far, there has been very little research on such aspects of recent migration of Poles and other CEE citizens to Great Britain. The small sample of this study clearly does not allow us to draw general conclusions on the conversions of Poles and other CEE citizens to Islam. However, the data collected in the course of this research provides some preliminary findings and insights into the complex processes of conversions in the context of migration. Among other things, the research showed the difficulties of religious self-transformation and learning in the context of the highly diverse and fragmented Muslim population in the UK and the challenges of maintaining relations with family members and friends who hold negative views about Islam and its believers.

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