

A REPORT ON

# CONVERSION TO ISLAM IN PRISON AND ITS AFTERMATH



*‘Caring for Converts and Connecting  
Communities’*

*The New Muslims Project*  
  
**THE NEW MUSLIMS  
PROJECT**

*in  
partnership  
with*

  
**THE CONVERT MUSLIM  
FOUNDATION**

فَإِنْ تَابُوا وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَوُا الزَّكَاةَ فَأِخْوَانُنَا فِي  
الدِّينِ وَفَصَّلُ الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١١﴾

if they repent and establish prayer, and give  
*Zakah* — they are your brothers in faith, (thus)  
do We expound Our revelations to those  
who know.

[Al-Tawbah 9: 11]

# STAFF AND PARTICIPANTS

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<b>Ahtsham Ali</b>	Muslim Advisor to HMP
<b>Batool Al-Toma</b>	Director, New Muslims Project, UK
<b>Andrew Barson</b>	Outreach mental health worker and NMP advocate
<b>Sofia Buncy</b>	Khidmat Centres, Bradford
<b>Sheikh Shafi Chowdhury</b>	Prison Chaplaincy
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## **NOTE OF THANKS**

We would like to express our sincere thanks to The Islamic Foundation and to the Markfield Conference Centre who hosted this event and who have provided ongoing support to the New Muslims Project, its service provision and project initiatives, over the past 25 years.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief report results from a discussion programme, organised by The New Muslims Project in partnership with The Convert Muslim Foundation in March 2018, which brought together practitioners and interested members of Muslim communities concerned with improving outcomes for Muslims who are currently serving, or who have served, prison sentences. It provides a snapshot of issues surrounding the growing problem within Muslim communities of increasing numbers of men and women being sent to prison, with an intended special focus on those who have embraced Islam while serving custodial prison sentences, though the organisers consider that this particular aim was only partially realised and requires further investigation into this specific concern. Possible ways forward are considered to reduce the numbers of Muslims caught up in the criminal justice system, principally by reducing re-offending. Suitable support mechanisms for converts to Islam while incarcerated alongside post-release steps towards reintegration and resettlement into society are proposed and will be further discussed and developed at future events currently being prepared. A series of recommendations are offered as potential routes forward.

## FORWARD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The New Muslims Project & The Convert Muslim Foundation expresses its sincere thanks to everyone involved in the roundtable discussions for so willingly giving their time to visit Markfield and engage in several intense days of conversation focusing on how to improve the lives and outcomes for prisoners who have embraced Islam. Resulting from this process is anticipated a steering group to convene, review and implement the report's recommendations, where possible, and to engage further with researchers and professionals working in the field to move debates and discussion forward, along with advancing and monitoring the progression of supportive projects and new developments as they emerge across the UK.

## AIMS OF THE PROGRAMME

1. Arriving at a better understanding of the judicial system;
2. Exploring the phenomena of conversion to Islam in prison;
3. Discussing the role of Chaplains in relation to conversion, comprehending the issues concerned and further training required;
4. Preparation for prisoners' release and meeting Muslim communities;
5. Explore what assistance convert care providers realistically can offer?
5. Create a receptive culture to assist ex-offender Convert Muslims.

## WHO IT WAS HOPED WOULD ATTEND

Anyone providing Convert Care at a local and national level in Britain;  
Those who aim to support Convert ex-offenders on release and resettlement;  
Those who work in placement schemes or projects for ex-prisoners;  
Those who are actively providing services at local Mosques.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Raising awareness of issues surrounding Muslims in prison in England and Wales, to affect attitudinal change within Muslim communities, particularly where female prisoners are concerned.
2. Facilitate constructive community engagement with Muslim prisoners both pre- and post-release.
3. Map existing services across England and Wales.
4. Support sponsorship/scholarship schemes onto Islamic Studies degree programmes to increase the number of African-Caribbean Muslim chaplains in England and Wales qualifying for chaplaincy posts and employment.
5. Attract female leadership and develop strategies to increase the number of Muslim women working as chaplains.
6. Provision of spaces/hostels and housing for Muslims seeking to exit crime.
7. Lobby to increase the percentage of prison staff employed from Muslim backgrounds.
8. To work with lobbying/pressure groups to reduce the numbers of Muslims sent to prison.
9. Re-orientate understandings of Islam within prisons to enable faith to play a positive role within and beyond prison.
10. Re-education programmes to mitigate the effects of gangs, drugs and negative self-representations on young people who embrace Islam.
11. Work with the principle mosques in each city to develop and ensure packages of support for people leaving prison.
12. To advocate the further development of community chaplaincy/mentoring schemes.
13. Instigate detailed research into Muslims in prison, examining alternatives to custodial sentences, review support services, consider how to reduce offending and break cycles of crime.





## PRESENTERS

**Ishtiaq Ahmed** – following almost forty years of community service, Ishtiaq has stood up for the rights of the disadvantaged, sought to improve community relations, and continues to be a voice of reason for unity and togetherness. During his career he has held a variety of community development, and racial equality roles. At present he is the Projects' Strategic Support Officer, Khidmat Centre; and Business Support Officer and Media Relations, Council for Mosques. Ishtiaq has held positions in local, regional and national forums. He counsels on inter-faith and community relations, along with community development and equality. At present he advises on issues affecting Muslim women in prison and post-release.

**Ahtsham Ali** – is currently the Muslim Advisor for HMP service. His work includes national policy development regarding the faith needs of Muslim prisoners, along with the recruitment and training of Muslim chaplains. With over 23 years' experience working with Muslim youth and communities in a variety of capacities, his roles have included operating as a project manager resettling Muslim clients on probation orders. As part of the Community Cohesion Review Team set up following the 2001 riots in the north of England, he helped author *The Cattle Report*. Ahtsham holds an MA in Theology and Religious Studies and has studied extensively with Sheikh Abdullah al-Judai over several decades.

**Batool Al-Toma** – is Director of the New Muslims Project, a national UK based service related to the support, education, training and continued development of converts to Islam in the UK established in 1993. She is editor of the Meeting Point and has initiated, contributed towards and produced several pieces of research including: *Between Integration and Isolation – a report on the convert community in Leicester*; *Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain – Female Perspectives*; and *Spirituality – the Plight of the Convert Muslim*.

**Andrew Barson** – is an outreach mental health worker in Leicester. He is the anchor of the New Muslims Project and provides support to the project and the Islamic Foundation in numerous ways. Andrew has led workshops, steering groups and think-tanks and continues to offer much needed direction, advice and guidance for which the NMP is extremely grateful.

**Sofia Buncy** – Khidmat Centre, Bradford, is the co-author of the acclaimed first report produced on Muslim Women in British Prisons. 'Muslim Women in Prison' is based at the Khidmat Centre in Bradford from where Sofia has built a Muslim women's community resettlement model. The centre has been vetted to take women from Askham Grange (open prison) on placement which is a pilot project. Ex-offenders are taken on placement in the busy centre which houses multiple services. Khidmat Centre also act as resettlement hubs and engage out-on-site services to re-settle women back into the community. The ethos is to create a culture of acceptance for working with Muslim offenders within the community centre. Currently, the process of writing up the Muslim women's resettlement model continues which has been supported by input from Imams. Below is a link to access the report:

[http://hpca.org.uk/upload/ourwork/1469102220-1764225782-MWIP\\_Report.pdf](http://hpca.org.uk/upload/ourwork/1469102220-1764225782-MWIP_Report.pdf)

Sofia was awarded the Butler Trust Award and an Asian Woman Achievement Award (2017) for her work in this field.



**Sheikh Shafi Chowdhury** – graduated from one of the oldest Islamic seminaries in the UK where he studied Islamic sciences with *isnad* (unbroken chains of transmission to classical masters) in the fields of Qur’anic recitations and exegesis, *Hadith* studies and narration of the Six Canonical texts, *Fiqh* (Jurisprudence), *’Aqidah* (Doctrine), and Arabic Language. He has been involved in extensive community work and teaching maintaining an open-minded approach and building bridges between communities. He is an easy to approach scholar, who works at grassroots level.

**Raymond Douglas** – is one of the UK’s leading thinkers and practitioners around reducing gang violence. A prolific desistance practitioner he has created numerous prison intervention programs tackling conflict and violence. To date, his program has reached over 10,000 young people annually, and his motivational and transformational seminars aim to reduce the number of young people at risk of life threatening behaviour involving guns, gangs and knife crime. Raymond is an accomplished serious film producer, who has produced several short films including ‘*On Road*’ which portrays the realities of inner-city youth culture and won best short film at the Harlem film festival. He continues to lecture at schools, colleges and universities, both nationally and internationally. Amongst appearances at Tedx, and alongside a catalogue of work nationally and internationally - 2018 see’s the release of his first book, “Gangs Kitchen.”

**Farzana Shaheen** – promotes Stepping Stones 2 Wisdom, a national organisation offering a range of services including a sisters’ project, matrimonial services, a youth project, support for reverts, and a prisoners’ project supporting offenders both within prison and in the wider community upon release.

**Dr Roderick Vassey** – embraced Islam during 1984, when compiling a PhD on Indo-Persian interpretation of the Bhagavadgita, in Mughal India, with special reference to the Sufi version of Abd al-Rahman Chishti. His career has focused on Arabic-Islamic civilisation. For six years he was a curator of Arabic manuscripts and books, before moving to become the British Library’s regional marketing manager for the Middle East. Currently, a part-time tutor of Arabic-language classes and courses on various aspects of Islam at the University of York’s Centre for Lifelong Learning, while for the last three years his main role has been as a Muslim prison chaplain working with young offenders.



# 1

## INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW MUSLIMS PROJECT

- 1.0** For the past 25 years the New Muslims Project (NMP) has offered a range of services to those new and not so new to Islam from across the UK. The project has facilitated trips to Muslim countries alongside pilgrimages to *Hajj* and *Umrah*. It has devised a national network support system, linking converts in their localities with mentors and volunteers. Counselling and advice have been freely provided along with a range of educational and social events, courses and programmes, including a four-stage residential Qur'anic Arabic course, and an annual weekend, the *Ramadan* Retreat. *Shahadah* certification and gift packs are available on request. Communication is maintained through a variety of sources including the Meeting Point Newsletter containing details of events, articles and information useful to those embracing Islam. As part of its research output the NMP has staged several round-table discussion forums. Reports are produced on conversion to Islam – with the NMP currently engaged in several exploratory projects.
- 1.1** Since its inception in 1993 the NMP has forged links with prisoners serving sentences in prisons across the UK and USA. Due to a restricted mandate the project has offered limited ad hoc forms of support to those who have embraced Islam during periods of imprisonment and following release. The regular distribution to both prisoners and prison chaplains of the Meeting Point Newsletter, keeps channels of communication open, while the provision of Qur'ans, books and pamphlets offers additional information, education, and advice on different aspects of Islam. Befriending, counselling and advice is offered and sustained through regular correspondence with prisoners, and by offering limited forms of financial help, via distributing *zakat* and *sadaqah* charitable donations. Financial assistance has at times been provided post-release, along with referrals to agencies designed to assist with resettlement and support for newly released prisoners. The NMP is keen to develop further competence in this field and recognises that its involvement to date has been limited in both scope and provision.
- 1.2** To improve knowledge of a range of ways through which the NMP along with concerned individuals, charities and organisations can assist Muslim prisoners, and to discuss existing provision operational, a two-day roundtable seminar was convened to bring together practitioners working in the field along with volunteers interested in offering help. A report detailing the discussions was compiled. Included, are a set of recommendations laying the foundation for further, more detailed discussions along with proposing practical forms of action.

- 1.3** While the weekend's discussion centred on exploring the phenomena of prisoners embracing Islam while in prison, it was premised on receiving the present prison system as given. Attempts were not made to debate the legitimacy of incarceration as a system of correction or punishment, nor to discuss aspects of its inhumanity, neither to consider alternatives to custodial sentencing practices. Discussion focused on unpicking how conversion occurs in an institutional setting including how it is received and addressed by both prisoners and prison authorities. Existing challenges faced by prisoners are acknowledged along with the practicalities of developing potential support services to enable those who have embraced Islam and received custodial sentences to access a range of provision post-release. As part of such discussions the type and breadth of support services that can be realised is dependent on the degree of commitment and dedication shown by those involved, coupled with their access to resources.
- 1.4** An improving picture nationally of services already operative across Britain, is provided by Islamic charities, organisations and individuals, although this remains mostly random, patchy provision and miniscule in range and scope when compared to a need for comprehensive targeted holistic facilities. Preparing prisoners for release and finding entry points and safe, welcoming spaces through which former prisoners can access mainstream Muslim communities was a central area for discussion, along with fostering a culture of acceptance providing openings into wider society for those who have embraced Islam and completed a prison sentence, so that a constructive reconfiguring of lives post-release can be assisted and encouraged. Heightened demand for care is occurring against a backdrop of ideologically and politically driven austerity measures within the UK which are serving to curtail and remove existing supportive provision across a wide range of agencies that can adversely impact the future life chances, safety, security and stability of offenders both within the prison system and externally following release into society.
- 1.5** When possible, and where openings are secured, the future implementation of proposals arising from the report's findings may contribute to reduce reoffending rates and prepare former prisoners to practice their newly found faith effectively in conducive environments removed from a prison setting. Other aims were to facilitate an improved understanding of the judicial system in the UK; to assess the role of chaplains in relation to supporting the adoption of Islam by prisoners as a faith choice; acknowledging the training chaplains receive in relation to understanding the trajectories that prisoners may experience both within the prison system and post-release; to consider ways to improve the levels of support and religious education within the prison setting and enable this to translate into sustained growth within Muslim communities and wider society both for the organisations supporting Muslim prisoners and the ex-offenders themselves. This is anticipated to enhance support services already in existence, especially those provided by a range of Muslim charities, NGO's, the Prison Chaplaincy sector and other individuals, and to develop links and build partnerships with external agencies operational in the field. The construction of policies of good practice can assist with a cultivation of resilience both for the prisoner and those supporting prisoners, who seek to enable faith to flourish in a positive direction.



## 2

# MUSLIM PRISONERS' CHAPLAINCY SERVICES WITHIN PRISONS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

- 2.0** An overview of the role and purpose of chaplaincy and particularly how it operates in a Muslim context was provided to participants. For those embracing Islam in a prison context, aside from fellow prisoners, Muslim chaplains are a key legitimate source of Islamic authority and guidance within the institutional setting, and therefore, can play a key role by helping to secure and nurture newly found faith. Access to Muslim chaplains can be crucial to those embracing Islam within prison. It is important to understand the vital role played by chaplaincy within the prison service in addressing the spiritual and practical needs of prisoners and so a detailed overview is presented within the report.
- 2.1** The prison service with its headquarters in London is divided into three sub-sections: Scotland, Northern Ireland, and England and Wales. Within England and Wales there are 126 prisons, detaining 85000 prisoners, of which 13,200 are Muslim (September 2017 figures: Muslims comprise 15.4% of the total prison population, although only constituting slightly less than 5% of the general population). A contentious first phase of development of super-prisons housing over 1500 inmates in each institution is presently under construction.
- 2.2** Each prison is under the control of a governor, who has a deputy and a management team. Under the 1952 Prison Act every prison must have a chaplaincy department. Although chaplaincy was originally devised to promote the spiritual needs of Christian prisoners its remit has extended to recognise a range of religious faiths practiced within Britain, which are served by their own faith advisors. The religious and pastoral role of the chaplain within the prison system is to act as a key facilitator for prisoners' spiritual development. Guy Harrison describes pastoral care as: 'theologically informed care that is concerned with the wellbeing of individuals and communities... and concerned to respond to human distress wherever it is found, especially where that distress leads to a loss of hope in the transforming nature of love.' Belief systems not recognised within the prison system include Scientology and the Nation of Islam. A major proportion of prisoners are registered on entry to prison as not adhering to any faith persuasion. The largest group registering a faith are Roman Catholics followed by Muslims.
- 2.3** Considering the structure of chaplaincy each prison (except 8 prisons) has a Managing Chaplain who oversees the implementation of chaplaincy programmes and provision. By 2018, 8 of the Managing Chaplains were Muslim. This had occurred despite immense opposition from Christian chaplains to the prison service expanding roles beyond the Anglican faith. The subsequent tier of provision consists of Employed Chaplains who are drawn from the predominant faiths



within the prison, for example, Roman Catholic or Islam. By 2018, 132 Employed Muslim Chaplains were working in prisons in England and Wales, figures which had grown from 16 in 2004. Their roles are supported by Sessional Chaplains who are employed ad hoc and paid on a piecemeal basis (with a current hourly rate of £14 per hour, plus travel expenses). While there are moves to raise the status of Sessional Chaplains to employed, at present, if for example, a prison holds one Hindu prisoner then it must provide a sessional Hindu chaplain to provide spiritual guidance. In turn, chaplains are regulated and subject to disciplinary procedures and civil service employment rules. Figures for 2018 revealed 98 Sessional Chaplains of whom 13 were female. With few Muslim women trained to the requisite levels required by the prison service, the numbers of Muslim women working as chaplains remains inadequate.

**2.4** The recruitment processes which chaplains undergo are rigorous, with English proficiency essential along with the possession of an in-depth demonstrable knowledge of Islam. Pre-requisite vital qualities include leadership skills, an aptitude for effective decision making, a flair for communication, along with charisma and empathy. Interviews are designed to include improvised role play situations, using an actor taking the role of a prisoner, whereby, the chaplain must effectively handle difficult prisoners and scenarios to display the essential characteristics required for the post. This recruitment policy is designed to ensure that only the best candidates are employed. As one prisoner mentioned ‘Why do I have to come to prison to get a good *Imam*?’ The starting salaries for these posts commence at £23-24,000 increasing to £31-34,000.

**2.5** On entry to the prison system prisoners must register their faith to receive a visit from the prison chaplain. It is a mandatory requirement for every new prisoner professing and registering a faith to be visited. Such visits are important as newly incarcerated prisoners are particularly susceptible to self-harm and are a potential suicide risk due to the shock of imprisonment. For prisoners who wish to embrace Islam and change their faith this must be registered on the local prison computer – the prisoner, then receives a visit by a chaplain from the faith which the prisoner is leaving, and subsequently from the chaplain representing the newly acquired faith.



## COMPOSITION OF CHAPLAINS

- 3.0** *Deobandi* chaplains, products of the *dar ul-loom* religious seminaries, who follow *Hanafi fiqh*, dominate within the prison chaplaincy profession, constituting 80% of prison *Imams*, followed by *Barelwis* chaplains. This reflects the 60% proportion of the South Asian heritage-derived Muslim prison population. The *Deobandi* training methods have reportedly left serious omissions due to a marked lack of pastoral and interpersonal skills training which when applied to chaplaincy practice requires serious attention. Christian chaplains already specialists in pastoral care, can offer these missing elements of training.
- 3.1** Arabs, Africans and Egyptians are also represented within the chaplaincy profession – there are also seven Muslim chaplains who are converts to Islam. However, the over-representation within the prison system of South Asian heritage chaplains can pose cultural issues and barriers particularly raising problems with determining *fiqh* related issues for Muslim prisoners who do not follow this *madhab*. As all different interpretations of Islam are present within the prison population, being subject to *fiqh* rulings determined by *Deobandi* clerics can lead to dissatisfaction and unrest. *Fiqh* issues may centre on rulings regarding *halal* meat, sports, clothing, music, and issues such as, *Eid* being celebrated on different days, when there is only one day permitted within a prison setting for its celebration, or contentions regarding the permissibility of giving salaams to non-Muslims.
- 3.2** As only one chaplain from an African-Caribbean heritage is currently employed within the prison system in England and Wales, converts to Islam from this heritage are effectively denied prison chaplaincy representation from chaplains reflecting their own cultural backgrounds. This situation continues unchallenged despite some prisons within the London area being almost solely populated by prisoners from African-Caribbean heritage. Although vacancies are advertised on the internet, the reasons underlying a lack of applications from this cohort require serious examination. Barriers to information about chaplaincy roles and careers require existing prison chaplains to visit African-Caribbean community settings to raise awareness of the profession and encourage entry points into chaplaincy, including promoting Islamic religious literacy, encouraging the study of degree level courses in Islamic studies, which is necessary to get through the rigorous selection process.
- 3.3** In terms of established training courses specifically designed for chaplains, Markfield Institute of Higher Education annually offers a Certificate in Muslim Chaplaincy short-course established since 2003, which has trained over 150 chaplains, many of whom now practice in a variety of chaplaincy settings. The course establishes a foundational basis for chaplaincy supported by a vocational course training placement in a prison, hospital, college or university, plus written coursework requirements. To gain in-depth religious knowledge, the development of a possible

sponsorship/scholarship scheme promoting potential chaplaincy students from an African-Caribbean heritage entry onto Islamic studies degree programmes to provide the theological input and development of religious knowledge required by the prison service, is needed to encourage and facilitate such applications.

**3.4** Open Days where potential chaplains are invited into prisons as part of an educative inductive process could also be arranged. However, to date such measures have been precluded due to austerity constraints and a noticeable lack of will. The implementation of such measures has the potential to improve levels of provision and cultural-religious representation for prisoners of African-Caribbean heritage.

**3.5** As mentioned earlier there is also a marked shortage of female leadership within the chaplaincy profession and Muslim chaplains. For example, during 2012 the female Muslim chaplain at HMP Moulton Hall left the post and the subsequent applicants for the vacancy were all male. This again, requires cultural changes to encourage Muslim women to train for these posts because female prisoners have the right to access female chaplains; there may be many personal issues which a female Muslim prisoner may not feel comfortable broaching with a male Muslim chaplain. Again, due to certain religious interpretations of Islam adhered to by some *ulama*, as well as, cultural conformities, individual male chaplains may themselves not be comfortable with administering chaplaincy services to female Muslim prisoners.

**3.6** A strange example was cited of an albeit unsuccessful male chaplaincy applicant who when asked during a prison chaplaincy interview how he would address questions raised by female Muslim prisoners and interact with them, indicated that he would place his chair facing a wall so that he could not view the women concerned, and then get them to write down their questions on pieces of paper which they could then scrunch up and throw towards him, to enable him to read and respond to the questions, without directly interacting with the women.

**3.7** In terms of Muslim charitable organisations, they do not presently fund training and meetings to allow Muslim chaplains to meet and examine measures to improve their skill sets and enhance good practice within the profession. This means that further training for Imams working as chaplains is required to provide education on the specific needs of those embracing Islam, and the additional needs of converts in a prison context, in order to assist converts to sustain their faith. The prison context may serve to heighten and exacerbate both the generic and specific challenges that commonly face converts. Limited funding available has been used to raise awareness of extremism, a politically charged issue which has been prioritised over other needs, and subsequently, allows Imams to gather periodically for small injections of training.





## 4

### MUSLIMS WITHIN PRISON

- 4.0** Muslims in prison represents an enigma, when viewed through the prism of Islam as a law-abiding system of guidance, which requests exemplary behaviour from its followers, stemming from awareness that God observes all our thoughts and actions. There is nonetheless, a long history of leading jurists, scholars and devout practitioners being imprisoned for demonstrating religious conviction, or for political and fabricated reasons. Concern surrounds increasing incarceration rates for Muslims which have reached dangerously high levels within the UK and highlights a need to dissect the complex contributory factors fuelling this surge. If Muslims behaviour reflects the society from which they are derived, for those imprisoned, this phenomenon reveals fractured legitimacy both within Muslim communities and broader society.
- 4.1** Regarding Muslim males in prison, this was partially attributed to a growing phenomenon of emasculated males suffering trauma – where societal rites of passage have been removed – coupled with a culture where the increasingly dominant discourse has re-centred from portrayals of violence in films to physical senseless violence on the streets. Societal focus on the individual obscures deep-seated structural determinants propelling social disintegration. The instillation of hope along with prospects for renewal, recovery and redemption is crucial to Muslim communities, coupled with the realisation that only in a state of discomfort can a person continually grow.
- 4.2** Muslims are overrepresented in crime statistics and as a sector of the prison population, as detailed above. Muslims are also overrepresented within three principal categories of crime. Around 200 Muslim prisoners are currently held as Terrorism Act Offenders, although 175 Muslims have been convicted of terrorism offences between 2001-2012 according to Home Office figures, others for drugs related offences and sexual crimes – characterised by grooming. The numbers of Muslims in prison for drug offences in England and Wales rose by 63% over 7 years from 2089 in 2010 to 3406 in 2017. Female Muslim prisoners tend to be incarcerated due to drug related/drug mule offences and crimes of passion - with five female Muslim prisoners detained under Terrorism Acts. In relation to individual prisons, HMP Whitemoor, a 'Category A' prison in Cambridgeshire houses the highest proportion of Muslim prisoners of any prison within the UK. Here, 44% of inmates are Muslim.
- 4.3** Structural factors also contribute to the overrepresentation of Muslims within the criminal justice system. Underlying reasons for structural disparities between white and BAME groups of prisoners were not discussed in the forum. Socio-economic inequality along with structural injustice transpiring as institutionalised racism pervades all levels of the criminal justice system. Sundar Ali noted that during 2015 10% of local authorities in the most deprived areas are home to 46% of Britain's Muslim population. The Equality and Human Right Commission Report (2011) shows that while 25% of all children are raised in single parent families as many as 65% of African-Caribbean heritage children are raised by one parent. Statistics show that children of



single parents are more likely to leave education early, more likely to end up in prison and more likely to become single parents. Frequently, single-parents take several jobs to make ends meet and when combined with a lack of extended family support impacts adversely on their capacity to parent effectively. Reflecting on a well-known West-African proverb, 'it takes a village to raise a child,' where the 'village' does not exist leads to a further West-African quotation: 'If young people aren't initiated into the village they will burn it down to feel its warmth.'

**4.4** Economic costs of crime are incredibly high – in terms of violent incidents- one shooting costs around £1.4 million and a stabbing is estimated at £300,000. Costs of incarceration currently exceed £40,000 per prisoner each year, whereas the expense of each new prison place averages £119, 000. High recidivism rates equate to exceptionally poor value for money. The personal costs appear astronomical and the impact on families, communities and wider society cascades. Prisoners receiving custodial sentences risk losing their relationships, marriages, jobs, homes, children and detrimentally impact their own future life chances and mental health, often establishing inter-generational cycles of deprivation and disadvantage that can continue for decades.

**4.5** Large disparities exist between BAME prisoners, many of whom are Muslims, in comparison to their white counterparts: from disproportionate levels of stop and search, increased likelihood of being charged with offences, moving up sentencing tariffs more rapidly, being more likely to receive custodial sentences, and receiving longer custodial sentences. The appointment of magistrates also requires urgent review: 'whose qualifications for dispensing justice is filling out a form, passing an interview, doing some charity work and being willing to sit for 13 days a year, with 18 hours of training.' Frequently, inadequately versed in diversity issues, magistrates are largely derived from the pale, male sections of British society, whose lives and experiences do not generally resonate with those they are sentencing, parallels an equally out-of-touch judiciary whose ability to relate to defendants is minimal. To address incongruences would require substantial reviews and changes to the selection and recruitment of magistrates and judges. Seeking to comprehend magistrates and judges as possible agents of change within existing sentencing structures will not provide an environment conducive to decreasing short prison terms and arguably may exacerbate increases in sentencing tariffs.

**4.6** In terms of transatlantic comparisons, human rights concern frequently raised over practices deployed by the US prison system obscure statistical similarities within the UK. The Equality and Human Rights Commission reveals a greater disproportionality in the number of black people in prison in the UK than the USA: within England and Wales, black people are now seven times more likely to be imprisoned than whites per head of population. Home Office figures for 2016-2017 show that despite reforms to stop and search policies largely targeting low level drug offences young black males are eight times more likely to be stopped than their white counterparts, and males of Asian extraction twice as likely. The Independent's Freedom of Information request highlighted increases in the number of Muslims imprisoned for drug related offences which rose by 63% from 2010-2017. One quarter of all Muslims imprisoned are for drug offences – this is compared to figures for non-Muslims of 13%. To compound an already dire set of statistics, UN human rights experts have expressed serious concerns over the deaths of disproportionate numbers of people of African descent and of ethnic minorities in the UK resulting from the application of excessive force by state security personnel. 'The deaths reinforce the experiences of structural racism, over-policing and criminalisation of people of African descent and other minorities in the UK.'

## CONVERSION IN PRISON

- 5.0** Coverage through the right-wing media has essentialised conversion to Islam in prison as problematic, in terms of its actual and potentially negative effects, both concerning behaviour within a prison setting, relating to bullying and gang related abuse, and externally post-release in terms of prisons being incubators enculturing extreme ideologies and fostering a propensity towards terrorist related activities. An over representation of converts in figures for terrorist related activity obscures the fact that while presenting as an alarming statistic this still represents a miniscule minority of converts who become engaged in such activity. The overwhelming majority do not. “Staff at one high security prison believed that some Muslim gangs put pressure on non-Muslims to convert and on Muslims to conform to a strict and extreme interpretation of Islam.”
- 5.1** A scoping study of young Muslim offenders in London and Leicester found that young men embracing Islam in prison faced ‘suspicion and negativity.’ Whereas, only 1% of Muslims offenders are imprisoned for terrorist offences a strong perception exists among professionals that prisons foster radicalization which develops into more punitive responses to Muslim offenders. The research report further acknowledged that ‘criminal justice agencies are missing out on an opportunity to harness Islam’s potential to help young Muslims rehabilitate.
- 5.2** Ryan Williamson, from Cambridge University’s Prison Research Centre examined the role of Islam in three UK maximum security prisons stating: ‘Concern about radicalisation often reflects a failure to understand prison culture and its impact on prisoners’ behaviour. Within prisons, everyday Muslim practices of praying, reading the Qur’an, or even reading commentary from Muslim scholars about God’s creation and evolutionary theory can raise concerns over extremism. Research found no evidence that prisons are becoming terrorist training camps. Instead there is a warning that ‘a preoccupation with radicalisation is warping perceptions of prisoners’ behaviour and relationships. Ex-offenders state that institutional Islamophobia sees prison officers perceiving Muslims who follow their faith as suspicious.’ Williams noted the presence of influential Muslim prisoners who used their influence to maintain peace on the wings.
- 5.3** Media emphasis on cases reflecting engagement with terrorism following release from prison, include high-profile converts to Islam, for example, Germaine Lindsey, Richard Reid, Richard Dart, amongst others, which have intensified both media and official gaze on those entering Islam from a prison context. Levels of scrutiny placed on those embracing Islam within prisons have increased following terrorist attacks during 2005 in Britain. Prior to this conversion was

regarded more in terms of a generally uneventful personal change of faith. In turn, prisoners held in high security dispersal prisons reported quite negatively on their experiences. Here, 75% of Muslims felt unsafe in these prisons and these feelings were caused by their perception of prison staff. Such concerns may be genuine: as a case of a former-prison officer breaking a prisoner's ribs and knocking out some of his teeth indicates.

**5.4** Research conducted by the Runnymede Trust and the University of Greenwich found being black or Muslim doubles a prisoner's chances (40%) of having worse prison experiences– this can include the use of restraints and being placed in segregation when compared to white prisoners (21%). Here it was recognised that cultural awareness and unconscious bias training is critical to redress negative stereotyping and racism experienced by BAME prisoners.





## 6

### JUMMAH IN BELMARSH

- 6.0** The following example indicates the need for prisoners to receive suitable education about their faith, and that a lack of knowledge can cause unnecessary problems – which in this particular instance, could inflame a potentially violent situation. A chaplain’s role can centre on diffusing tension and reducing conflict. The environment in prison can add intensity to normal behaviour and interaction, so that things take on greater levels of importance and significance that would not normally occur on the outside. *Jummah salah* in Belmarsh involved prison officers assembling around 120 prisoners, many from London gang backgrounds, for Friday prayers. Most of them were converts to Islam mainly from African-Caribbean heritage, although some of the congregation were white Muslims.
- 6.1** In a maximum-security environment performing *wudu* and access to toilets and water could prove a challenge in enabling the men to be prepared and moved around the prison in time for the *iqama*. Understanding the conditions for ablution was testing when a belligerent prisoner unable to prepare became oppositional. To deflect the arising anger underpinning a prisoner being prevented from making *wudu* and possible inflammatory situations arising the chaplain explained the conditions under which *tayyamun* could be used and how, if necessary, it could be performed on a brick wall – this was an illustration that *shari’ah* is flexible, as is *fiqh*, and not an intransigent system. It also indicates the lack of basic knowledge on the part of the prisoner involved, and a priority for educational programmes on Islam to be widely offered.
- 6.2** Issues arising within other prisons highlight dangerous conditions. The example of HMP Leicester was given which operates as a remand prison with high rates of self-harm and actual suicides. David Jolliffe from the Centre for Criminology at the University of Greenwich stated:  
“Our research in prison has shown a worrying trend, with the policies to prevent self-harm and suicide based on a staffing level that no longer exists. Prison officers rarely have the time to develop the relationships with those in prison needed to truly provide support to help prevent self-harm and self-inflicted deaths, and the prison officer training on the complex area of mental health is essentially absent.”
- 6.3** The role of the prison chaplain may in some cases operate in a more neutral zone, as they are not always viewed by prisoners in the same way as prison officers. In helping to confront the psychological issues faced by prisoners, a role of chaplains is to facilitate coping strategies to assist with the diffusion of tension and stress and foster peace of mind thereby helping to build a



spiritual reconnection with faith. Work also involves helping prisoners to understand what they did, why it was wrong and to support new behaviours that reduce the risks of reoffending.

**6.4** The former leader of the English Defence League, Tommy Robinson, told a prison *imam* that he understood why people were converting to Islam because the Prison Chaplains took the time to engage with the prisoners and speak about their faith. It is here, through conversations with both Muslim and non-Muslims and people of faith and no-faith backgrounds that powerful engagement can occur.



# 7

## CASES

- 7.0** In terms of prisoners who assume violent misinterpretations of Islam the case of a young female prisoner sentenced to life for terrorism offences and serving a minimum tariff of fifteen years after stabbing a local MP who had voted in favour of British engagement with the war in Iraq was presented. The case details how difficult even after prolonged periods of time spent in prison it can be to try to unpick the discourse of extreme interpretations of Islam that have been deeply internalised. A gifted university student with a promising future who became addicted to the internet, spending ten hours per day online - self-radicalised after listening to Anwar Awlaki's speeches. For the first five years of her imprisonment she remained isolated and shrouded in a *burkha*. She suddenly emerged from her cell dressed in western fashionable clothes having abandoned both the *hijab*, and her daily prayers, and started to apply for prison courses. Prison staff took these changes in behaviour and appearance as signs that she had progressed and was no longer influenced by an extreme interpretation of Islam.
- 7.1** A prison *imam* visited her and enquired as to how she had discarded her previous strongly maintained views. She disclosed that she had stopped thinking about things and how her life had come to a grinding halt. She then admitted that she was still convinced by Awlaki's narrative. Visits stopped after she said: 'I don't know why I am being so honest with you, you are part of the government and I do not want to engage with you.' Questions are raised regarding how well *imams* can engage with people who have internalised problematic ideas: which may prove to be beyond their capacities to counter. Some people who have lost their sons or daughters to Syria have been informed that "this is a sacrifice expected of their faith:" representing an expression of sentiments, which again, can form part of an extreme narrative. It is increasingly acknowledged that deeply embedded thought processes are difficult to dislodge and reconfigure. Here, research findings of those involved with the de-programming of cult members may shed some light on effective ways of dealing with brainwashing. Psychological interventions require specialist training.
- 7.2** Other examples involved another terrorism offender who had attempted to blow up the London Stock Exchange – which was designated over a weekend to minimise the amount of people injured or killed. The prisoner was treated badly within the prison system which included having his medication withheld. A further example from Wakefield prison saw a prisoner deliberately kept in the freezing cold in a cell covered in faeces. The *imam* became aware of the conditions and forced the prison authorities to improve the situation. Such incidents detail darker aspects of closed institutions: at times a lack of accountability for prison officers' behaviour, including the abuse of power which detail inhumane and cruel treatment contravening human rights' legislation. Concerns have also been raised regarding the links between poor treatment, self-harm and suicide.

- 7.3** Where prisoners report feeling alienated and targeted, faith can offer meaning, hope and dignity. Reports and comments by prison governors (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons 2010) have highlighted the positive role that conversion to Islam in prison can play in improving an individual's behaviour whilst serving a sentence and fostering personal responsibility, focus and development both during the period of incarceration and post-release in terms of providing structure, direction and guidance towards developing faith, building and fostering family ties, finding employment and making a positive contribution to society. Positive behaviour can be reinforced via the respectful way many prison officers have responded to Muslim prisoners within their care.
- 7.4** Muslim prisoners, which include those who have entered Islam as well as incarcerated heritage Muslims, can establish a meaningful reconnection to their faith. Using the example of one prisoner who had embraced Islam and had developed his faith to the level where he was praying *tahajjud* each night details an example of the type of transformations that can occur within prison. The thought of release terrified him – which could mean the possible re-engagement with drugs and crime. He was unsure of whether he would be able to maintain his prayers and establish faith on the outside. Consumed with self-consciousness about entering a local mosque and uncertain of how to reach out to people in the local Muslim community, help is required to re-establish lives following release which must be a role taken on by the local Muslim community.
- 7.5** Examples cited above illustrate that when a person has made *tawba*, (sought forgiveness from God with an active intention not to repeat undesirable behaviour) established regular prayer in their lives and pushed back against the challenges they have faced – when a person commits to changing themselves spiritually – they can become unstoppable. For some the point at which they come unstuck is on release where a marked lack of social capital, which is a vitally important factor in reducing repeat offending, while typically, as a heritage Muslim, there are more means of accessing it. For reformed prisoners devotedly following Islam while inside - on release, where is the community? Who is there waiting to provide guidance and support? The major *masjids* in each city should have some form of resettlement projects to help converts, and in fact all Muslims needing support, following release from prison.
- 7.6** A young offender embraced Islam at the age of twelve. He developed knowledge of Islam whilst institutionalised and could recite *Surah Al-Baqarah* by heart and acquired an operational competence in Arabic. He became tormented by thoughts of what sort of world was awaiting him past the prison gates following his release. Success stories of prisoners who have embraced Islam in prison and have constructively built new lives following release do not feature as items of interest within the news media, as these do not fit within a dominant, targeted pejorative Islamophobic discourse. Prisoners who have embraced Islam in a prison setting may have studied the Qur'an and Arabic and acquired considerable education on aspects of Islam during their time inside, while many who adopt the faith with sincerity, commitment and high expectations are overlooked.
- 7.7** In cases of transformation of lives one example was discussed of a man who received his first prison sentence at the age of 16 and by the age of 17 was back inside. By the age of 19 he was heavily involved with drugs and guns. He realised his life was very wrong when he was



selling drugs in a crack house and a woman came to buy crack accompanied by her young child, whose birthday it was, and the mother was only focused on obtaining a hit. Increasingly aware of the pain he was causing to his family he sought ways to remove himself from gang culture. While in prison following a conviction for armed robbery he prepared himself to constructively face the consequences of his actions, and to assist other prisoners to do likewise. Following conversion to Islam through the *dawah* and advice of a taxi driver, a stranger whose counsel was a life changing catalyst, he is now leading a constructive life by helping others and providing training.

**7.8** Malcolm X, was cited as a powerful example of a successfully rehabilitated an ex-offender who embraced religion in prison and subsequently re-orientated his life towards serving God, following his release. It is also a story of a man who through divine guidance was fortunate to meet the right people at the right time to guide his journey forward and enhance his development of Islam. Prison can provide head-space to engage with faith and education. Malcolm X emerged from prison as a walking dictionary and highly eloquent orator and intellectual.

**7.9** Catalysts for conversion come in many forms. A further example provided was of a murderer who embraced Islam. Previously, a woman had asked him if he was hungry and then bought food for him. Several years later some Muslim women featured in a newspaper article, and he made the connection between Muslim women (wearing *hijab*) and the woman who had kindly given him food several years previously – then later took his *shahadah*.

**7.10** For other prisoners, engagement with Islam can manifest as an anti-establishment and anti-social form of negativity, becoming a vehicle to express anger, hatred and disgust. Adopting Islam can be perceived as cool and provide channels to convey allegiances to an individual group of Muslims, between groups of Muslim prisoners, among Muslims in general and provide connections to a wider *ummah*. Conversion can be merely superficial involving little more than name changes, and the liberal application of selected Islamic vocabulary, such as *kuffar*, *ackhi*, *in sha Allah*, *subhanallah*, and so forth, supported by a mindset of arrogance. Richard Dart who converted to Islam at the hands of Anjem Chowdhury, internalised disrespect toward non-Muslims and demonstrated this by only shaking hands with his brother using his left hand – ‘because he is a *kuffar*.’ Shallow attempts at embracing Islam are not softening the heart or showing signs of a positive personal transformation. Gangster lifestyles continue unabated, involving knifing one another and settling old scores. People can enter the faith carrying a lot of previous baggage – allowing certain messages to resonate more than others. A deeply spiritual focus is needed to awaken the heart and countenance disturbance within the ego.



## BREAKING THE CYCLE

- 8.0** 67% reoffending rates translate into, out of every three prisoners released, two will return to prison. In terms of Muslim ex-offenders this translates into an absence of support mechanisms and encouragement to break this cycle. Prison chaplains are not allowed to meet with prisoners following their release although there is involvement in befriending schemes which operate through MOSAIC, the Prince's Trust, and charities such as, Muslim Hands. Chaplains are also supported by a range of volunteers. Of the 7500 volunteers available, 7100 are Christian with hardly any available representation provided by Muslims. A pilot project is currently being trialled through Cambridge Muslim College aiming to train people to support prisoners. This initiative, together with others from organisations such as Stepping Stones to Wisdom in Bradford and Kube Publishing at Markfield in Leicester, have all donated CDs, Prayer mats and a wide range of literature to prisons for the use of Muslim prisoners. Multi-faith community chaplaincy programmes are a part of a growing independent voluntary sector comprising faith-based organisations working to secure crime free futures for former prisoners – offering mentoring and holistic support within prison, which continues post-release as community-based support. It has been argued that the 24-hour period following release from prison is crucial in determining whether a person will return to prison or make a go of a new way of life. Resettlement is the key issue for prisoners.
- 8.1** An area of omission in current prison research means that figures or accurate estimates for ex-offenders who sustain conversion post-release are not collated. There is no reliable way of assessing the extent to which the fervour and faith of the newly converted is sustained following release. Usama Hasan (Quilliam Foundation) approximates that roughly half of men and women who convert to Islam later leave the faith. How he arrives at such figures is not known. Whether statistical evidence, if they were to be prepared for former prisoners, are higher or lower than Hasan's estimates are another unknown. There is also a lack of research on the impact of Islam on offenders or the impact of religion on prisoners, although there are research proposals currently in the pipeline to address these omissions.
- 8.2** Prison service assessment of the numbers of converts incarcerated estimates 1500-2000 converts to Islam within the system. These figures may be under-estimates as within prisons there is frequently a culture of non-disclosure, based on a marked distrust of prison authority, whereby prisoners who embrace Islam may choose not to officially declare their faith. That faith operates covertly is illustrated by the remarks of a prisoner ... 'my job is to hide the prayer mats.' Chaplains in turn are not necessarily perceived as neutral arbitrators, as previously mentioned above, between prisoners and prison authorities, with alienated prisoners often viewing them with considerable mistrust. This was considered, 'a perverse consequence of chaplains' greater integration with prison life.' Research by Andrew Dodd questions the continued 'neutrality' of the chaplain. As an example of factors potentially compromising the neutrality of chaplains he

cites the Prevent strategy because it ‘offers the wrong kind of security. Confidential safe spaces in which people can be human, rather than the very different desired ‘safety’ of identifying, assessing and minimising the risk of extremism’ is surely what is required.’

**8.3** Allegations that prisoners choose to embrace Islam to attain extra privileges and rights, fail to be substantiated by reliable evidence and appear to rely on anecdotal examples related to gangs in prison forcing conversions through menacing behaviour. The extent to which this occurs is not documented, and therefore, remains unknown and subject to speculation. Instrumental reasons for conversions are considered to include access to certain privileges, such as, better sources of food, particularly during Ramadan, and being allowed to attend Friday prayers - providing opportunities to sell drugs, and pass messages.

**8.4** One case cited as an example of a ‘false conversion,’ illustrates two Roman Catholic prisoners who registered their conversion to Islam, allegedly to secure the protection of Muslim prisoners, and to avoid being beaten up by rival gangs. When the two prisoners were transferred to a different prison, they then re-registered their religious faith as Roman Catholic.





## CHARITABLE FUNDS

- 9.0** While over £400 million is collected annually by Islamic charities operating within the UK, Muslims tend to focus on foreign disasters rather than domestic crises and misfortunes that detrimentally impact individual lives. Tendencies to assist externally abroad, rather than internally within the UK, calls for educative policies within Muslim communities to offer realistic appraisals of the range of needs currently requiring direct attention within Britain and to encourage engagement and responsibility towards the welfare of fellow citizens. A provision of zakat collection acknowledged within the major madhabs is that it should be distributed locally, not extending beyond the distance that it would take to travel to shorten the prayer. Here ‘those whose hearts can be reconciled’ (i.e converts) and converts who have accrued debts, are eligible recipients within the Qur’anic categories.
- 9.1** Inward investment and increased levels of social engagement within the UK could serve to curtail a proportion of energy, resources and outlooks, from being channelled and diverted internationally. A failure to acknowledge dire situations within the UK frequently colludes with an erroneous belief that the remnants of the currently collapsing welfare state provide an adequate safety net to citizens. This constitutes a further set of recommendations to raise awareness of poverty, and the range of needs and community building measures required within a British context. Engagement with charitable interests within the UK may also off spin into encouraging integration between different groups and sects of Muslims, while fostering a better appreciation of Muslims within British society.
- 9.2** While Muslim populations continue to expand within the UK, the growing proportions of Muslims do not translate into a role model set of communities within the country. Perceptions of Muslim communities within the UK have shifted from that of law-abiding hardworking citizens to a range of problematic deviants, becoming the most maligned communities in Britain. This is illustrated by the 50% rise in the number of Muslims in prison over the past ten years. In terms of female prisoners, it was noted as a collective responsibility to determine why they are incarcerated. As the community of Muslims continues to grow, the increasing numbers who profess but do not practice their faith, highlights a pressing need for increased levels of religious literacy to help stem the endemic growth of social problems. The over-representation of Muslims in grooming cases is indicative of this lost moral compass.
- 9.3** Historically, prisons have been used by the state partially as a mode to control people and conveniently overlook social inequalities and problems. African-American academic and human rights activist, Angela Davis states: ‘Prisons do not disappear social problems, they disappear human beings. Homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, mental illness, and illiteracy are only a few of the problems that disappear from public view when the human beings contending

with them are relegated to cages.' Quality rehabilitation programmes are rarely operational, refuting official objectives to deter reoffending. When populations are mired in poverty, fail due to a multitude of real or perceived barriers to access educational opportunities, when structural inequalities are ignored, and people are religiously-racially profiled and are presented as a threat to society, an explosion in prison numbers can result.

- 9.4** More research is needed to comprehend the push factors underlying what is happening within Muslim communities to uncover in detail the motivational factors driving the rising levels of crime and incarceration. Cultural tendencies to sweep embarrassing issues under the carpet and not address contributory factors in an honest and open manner due to shame and denial are contributing to continued ignorance around the dynamics involved. This requires self-reflection and responsibility to effectively assess the situation.
- 9.5** In terms of young offenders, it was considered 'cool' among some inner-city Muslim youth to be sent to prison, particularly for those who had failed to secure employment or engage in education. Deliberate breeches of tags to expedite entry to prison were made. Here, crime can rapidly become a way of life which is exacerbated by the injection of negative and repulsive elements of youth cultures that celebrate and promote criminality and vice. This is exemplified via gang culture, where unprovoked violent attacks and murder are committed against rival gang members, some of whom have embraced Islam, often purely based on territoriality: their postcodes. A comment arguing for Muslims to take more responsibility for their behaviour was offered: 'How would you feel if your mother was mugged by one of your friends? What does the ... community need to do? – Stop committing crime.'
- 9.6** Prisoners who commit serious crimes may be signposted to psychological intervention programmes where restorative justice initiatives can be applied. Prisoners can be more open with a chaplain and it is an important part of acknowledging wrongful behaviour and seeking forgiveness in redressing past actions and being able to learn and develop. The Qur'anic example of restorative justice in the case of Yusuf whose brothers threw him down a well, which was the start of a series of humiliating experiences and subsequent imprisonment, but which ultimately led the brothers to seek forgiveness and redress for their actions. Reflection on past actions and being mindfully aware is part of Islam, which can be attained through *muraqaba* (mindful meditation). Restorative justice is also an important component of the faith, as is redemption and forgiveness.
- 9.7** For chaplains dealing with serious crimes such as horrendous acts against a child can mean administering pastoral support to monsters, coupled with an awareness that it is not the role of a chaplain to judge. A case was cited of a prisoner who attempted suicide. He broke down in tears questioning why he should be alive when he had killed a one-year old child. An understanding of the enormity of his crime was reached and he had to live the rest of his life with that knowledge. However, Muslim chaplains deal with difficult cases knowing that his/her role is to desire good for other people and to carry the load for people who are struggling – being a mercy to mankind. It is an essence of the *sunnah* to help those around us in whatever way possible.

# 10

## MUSLIM WOMEN IN PRISON

- 10.0** Whereas, Muslims have become relatively accustomed to male incarceration, the stigma surrounding female Muslim prisoners and the reasons for their imprisonment have been difficult to digest and socially taboo within Muslim families and communities. Gendered differences in the forms of crimes committed and the way male and female convert prisoners are responded to within the prison system were not compared in detail by participants. Among the general population of female prisoners, they are commonly imprisoned for petty crime. People are still sent to prison for non-payment of council tax and failure to buy television licences.
- 10.1** Cases were detailed where female Muslim prisoners had been duped while working in banks after becoming involved with Muslim men already engaged in crime – and were subsequently blackmailed into committing fraud within the organisations, built on the premise that their romantic/sexual relationship would be revealed to their family if they failed to comply. In addition, for many Muslim women prisoners there is a lack of understanding surrounding the workings of the prison system, and once inside they are less likely to have a support system of family and friends.
- 10.2** A further case was highlighted where a young Muslim woman was subjected to both sexual abuse and extreme violence – which included being forced to drink her own urine and eat her faeces. Her younger sister was killed in an honour killing. The woman was suicidal and inflicted high levels of self-harm on her own body. She required a range of sustained unconditional support measures to enable her to rebuild her life and to address her damaged mental health.
- 10.3** Female Muslim prisoners may bear the brunt of exclusionary practices. These can include rejection by families, shame and dishonour – their children may be taken away from them and their family may refuse to visit in prison. Many women cannot speak English and require other prisoners to assist them with their needs. For women with undetermined immigration status threats of deportation on release may be faced. Many Muslim women whose families considered they have brought shame and dishonour on the family effectively receive a second sentence after leaving prison. They may require safe-houses on release, which are offered as a temporary solution to threatening situations. Subjected to stigma and reprisals some women remain permanently unable to shake of the label of being ‘that woman who went to prison.’ This may lead to honour killings to rid the family of the shame of being associated with a convicted offender.
- 10.4** Within the prison setting the sense of isolation apparent for many Muslim women prisoners is compounded by the lack of prison officers derived from their heritage communities and



by structural racism and Islamophobia present within the prison system. BAME prison staff comprises 6% of all prison officers. Research conducted by Runnymede Trust indicated that the government needs to hire four times as many BAME prison officers to reflect the ethnic composition of the prison population.

- 10.5** For female Muslim converts in prison there is a marked lack of support structures on release. Although the completion of a prison sentence marks atonement for a crime committed within the law, the concept of forgiveness inherent within Islam is frequently disregarded, whereby, cultural practices prevent this from occurring. Reprisals, largely targeting heritage Muslim women, often in the form of coercion or violence exist, which has led to some former prisoners being subjected to forced marriages, or repressive forms of coercion and control.
- 10.6** Muslim charities have yet to engage with the issue of Muslim prisoners in a systematic and meaningful manner. This means that there are relatively few areas of the country where support systems can be accessed. The *Khidmat* centres have developed a resettlement model to overcome some of the barriers to reintegration into society based on Islamic principles. *Khidmat* centres take women prisoners on work placements prior to release. On release a range of services are operational including housing resettlement projects, one-to-one mentoring, confidence building and access to educational classes. The 2007 Corston Report considered housing as the most significant resettlement need for women prisoners.
- 10.7** Research and reports consistently reiterates that most women imprisoned are detained for petty non-violent offences that primarily should not receive custodial sentences and could be dealt with via community tariffs. The trajectories of female imprisonment are distinctly different to those of male offenders. Female prisoners are frequently characterised as the most powerless and disadvantaged women in society exhibiting high levels of mental illness and distress; with lives blighted by poverty, inequality and experiences of physical, sexual and emotional abuse and childhood neglect. Deborah Coles of the campaigning group, Inquest, argues that the criminal justice system 'keep sending women to prison who simply shouldn't be there,' and that custodial sentences should be reserved for a minority of serious female offenders, who should receive professional help. What is required is decent mental health services, safe housing and long-term assistance to address deep-seated traumas.
- 10.8** A blueprint for a radical overhaul of approaches to female offenders were detailed in a comprehensive series of recommendations embedded within the Corston Review (2007) which revealed cross-party agreement that prison remains a disproportionate and inappropriate response for many women, with intensely damaging knock-on effects for children, families and society, with over 18,000 children every year seeing their mothers sent to prison, and only 5% of these children being able to remain in the family home. Outlined within the report were proposals for community centred projects which had the potential to offer life transforming alternatives to break cycles of offending and reoffending for female prisoners. A subsequent re-evaluation in 2017 by the campaigning group, Women in Prison, *The Corston Report: 10 Years On* revealed that the review's major recommendations had been ignored – despite the report receiving cross-party support, while more women than ever were being incarcerated often for minor offences and the ground-breaking opportunity for radical change had been squandered.

**10.9** Taking several of the factors outlined above into account, an initial ground-breaking valuable pilot report produced by Sofia Buncy and Ishtiaq Ahmed, entitled, *Muslim Women in Prison*, compassionately and reflectively analysed the needs and experiences of Muslim women at HMP and YOI New Hall and Askham Grange prisons, both during custody and post-release. The report predominantly concentrated on the effects of imprisonment on seventeen women of South Asian, Arab and white British heritage and their families, including five women who had embraced Islam. Despite the subjects being Muslim women, cultural responses to female imprisonment hugely dominated the women's own self-perceptions, the families' view of the prisoner, along with crippling levels of stigma injected by their communities, based on shame, dishonour, guilt, reprisals and revenge, trampling over the principal Islamic values of love, justice, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and redemption. The report outlines how it is concerned with correction rather than punishment – an approach outlining transformation could have replaced this rather Victorian term.

**10.10** In terms of assessing the contents of the report outlined above in relation to this discussion, an omission was the minimal amount of attention drawn to converts' needs and the lack of at least one documented case study providing insight into the specific needs and requirements of this cohort of Muslims. Nonetheless, its compilation represents a remarkable step forward in documenting and raising awareness within the prison system and beyond of the specific cultural and religious characteristics of Muslim women. It highlights both the holistic approach taken and the workable measures that have been put in place to support female Muslim prisoners during imprisonment and following release. This is further substantiated by a robust series of recommendations.

**10.11** Offences outlined within the report which led to imprisonment included fraud, sham marriages, murder and conspiracy to supply narcotics. Obvious cases of manipulation into criminality were apparent and one case involving a 63-year-old woman convicted of supplying class A drugs who was transferred to an open prison depicted this reality. The woman experienced mobility issues, could not speak English, and faced a sense of isolation compounded by shame and humiliation over her sentence:

'At my age I should not be in prison, I spent all my life taking care of my children and relatives. Now in the last years of my life I have to experience this. Besides being in prison, I deal with shame and humiliation from people. I don't talk to anyone. I don't speak English so how am I to communicate with others?'

**10.12** For some Muslim women the time spent in prison provides a time of self-reflection and making amends with past behaviour, this may involve re-establishing a relationship with God and their Islamic faith. For heritage Muslims, some of whom rediscover and reengage with their faith whilst in prison, a reason for turning to God may in some cases be an attempt to assuage feelings of isolation.

## INCREASED RELIGIOSITY

- 11.0** To prison staff increased religiosity can be viewed with suspicion, whereby, engagement with religious practices demonstrates risk and possible radicalisation. Such assumptions may be due to a lack of religious awareness and/or prejudicial attitudes held on the part of staff unable to distinguish actual risk, or it may be indicative of some genuine threats. It was noted that prison officer's responses can reflect poor levels of education, and some held bigoted and racist right-wing views, holding fixed ideas regarding diversity, others were former members of the armed services, and inculcated authoritarian attitudes. It was noted that whereas security related issues were readily reported by members of prison staff, including innocuous superficial changes such as growing a beard or shortening trousers, there was not a proportionate reporting of far-right issues, including attacks on other prisoners, as this cohort of prisoners does not tend to be identified by prison staff. This may be due to some prison officers classifying far-right perspectives as unproblematic, possibly because such ideas resonate with their own views.
- 11.1** For chaplains encountering new conversions there is recognition that the prisoner has embraced Islam, and that they are to be assisted to become good examples of Muslims. Just as for converts outside of the prison system, those who are incarcerated have many different motives for embracing Islam, similar motivational factors are present inside. Knowledge of motivation is often not present and the extent to which a conversion is genuine is beyond the remit of the chaplain to judge.
- 11.2** Some prisoners, for example, are highly accustomed to violence and their understanding of what *shari'ah* means can be distorted to apply to violence. Part of the work of a chaplain is to promote balance, tolerance and moderation. Classes may be offered to prisoners to improve religious literacy. In terms of literature available to prisoners this must be assessed before it can be accessed, while the purchase and availability of texts is curtailed by financial constraints. Most prison chaplains have a library which includes donated materials. Determining the best books to provide to converts is rarely straightforward and requires rejecting texts which may contain questionable aspects.
- 11.3** Paralleling the Alpha course, a *tarbiyyah* programme 'Islam to Iman' promoting personal spirituality was devised and rolled out in 30 prisons, with over 2500 prisoners taking some, or all the level one modules. Part of the remit was discussing how to engage as Muslims with people around us and providing examples of how to address challenges presented to Muslims whose family are not Muslim, for examples the permissibility of attending weddings and funerals and Christmas celebrations. A diversity of areas such as sectarianism and arrogance were also included.



# 12

## ON THE OUTSIDE

**12.0** A former prisoner noted that prisoners must take responsibility for their actions and behaviour and know that the crimes they have committed are wrong and that consequences for unlawful behaviour will result in possible incarceration. Accountability was required for suffering caused. For some, criminality and frequent spells in prison become a way of life resulting from dysfunctional homes, poor choices, and environments where they are not valued as people and are treated appallingly, and, in turn, behave badly. Empowerment to take control of the trajectory of a person's life was required which would dispel tendencies toward victimhood. When a commitment was present to change one's life through spiritual means powerful transformations can occur.

**12.1** In terms of repairing lives and moving forward for those who have embraced Islam – possible family and community support networks may be absent and not exist in ways that many heritage Muslims may have access to which raises additional challenges to maintaining faith post-release and to prevent re-offending. Financial challenges frequently exist on release when presented with a £46 discharge grant – leading to questioning regarding where the *ummah* – the community is, when the prisoner reaches the prison gates and how can the person follow through and develop and sustain their faith? Within the UK minimal provision from a minority of charitable organisations is available. For example, assistance to prisoners is offered via the Date Palm Project, Muslim Women's Network, Muslim Aid and Muslim Hands.



# 13

## CONSTRUCTIVE RESPONSES – MOVING FORWARD

**13.0** Research by *Maslaha* examining young male offenders found that common factors hindering effective post-release resettlement included:

1. Severe social and economic disadvantage;
2. High levels of unemployment and discrimination;
3. Misunderstanding and disenfranchisement – meaning a lack of appropriate forums to allow self-expression;
4. Offenders and rehabilitation – the percentage of Muslims held in young offenders' institutions rose from 13% in 2009 to 22% during 2011-12.

**13.1** Factors hampering rehabilitation were discussed in a 2011 report by the Muslim Youth Helpline. These included:

1. A sense of isolation from wider society;
2. Misunderstandings of Muslims and Islam;
3. Disconnection from the state establishment and older generations.

**13.2** Salford Prison Project run by Salford's independent Unemployed and Community Resource Centre supports male prisoners' reintegration into society. Participation is on a voluntary basis. The work here bridges gaps in social capital. Staff meet prisoners prior to release and meet them on release at the prison gates. Priorities are the provision of accommodation, access to benefits and drug/alcohol support services where required. Mentoring involves support and assistance with a range of needs including cooking and social activities such as tennis and the gym. Mentors knock on the door and check to see what they might require in the way of support, help is provided with a CV preparation to accessing training courses and visiting rights to see their children. It is acknowledged that jobs and marriage facilitate resettlement by helping to anchor stability into a person's life.

**13.3** A former prisoner now working as a project officer stated:

I know how tough it is when people get out they may be homeless, have problems with drugs or alcohol, no money, no food, clothes or washing facilities, mental health issues and a poor social network if they have one at all – and they get constantly judged on their record.

**13.4** As one former prisoner stated: ‘The sheer scale of what you have to do to change your life can be overwhelming.’ Things must be broken down in to small manageable goals. The key to success is having someone who believes in you. For those embracing Islam are largely released into an abyss – where is the Muslim community upon release? – Who is waiting to help salvage a future? – Ex-offenders can’t find groups to identify with beyond the gates.

**13.5** Encouraging results from the Salford project saw a substantial fall over two years in reoffending rates which were reduced to less than 9% compared to an average of 60% for those serving sentences of less than 12 months.





## FACILITTING COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

**14.0** Ideas were discussed regarding the types of supportive provision that could be considered for people leaving prison which may be offered by Islamic charities and individuals. The first point of consideration involved what support should be doing. The following suggestions were made:

1. Third spaces – for example, coffee shops as community hubs – these were suggested as neutral spaces where people could socialise and access other forms of support;
2. Through the Gate Mentors – someone to offer personal one to one support (starting six weeks prior to release);
3. Devising personal pre-release plans – to provide structure and continuity;
4. Befriending – a *murshid* (guide) playing an advocacy role;
5. Community development – making the community ready to receive and befriend prisoners – offering ranges of services which can include accommodation, counselling, employment, voluntary work, social activities or befriending, religious education and support;
6. Providing leisure time activities – these could include pool, gym and other activities with fellow Muslims;
7. Family – emphasising the importance of retaining connections with family members – don't underestimate the need for continued family support and to keep connected to blood relatives;
8. Weekly/monthly gatherings to share food – communal meals.

**14.1** Discussion then focused on how to make interventions work differently. The following suggestions were made:

1. Safeguarding – risk assessments;
2. Boundaries – in our relationships;
3. Professionalism – in wider culture;
4. Branding – conveying what you did;
5. Confidentiality – ensuring data protection;
6. Codes of conduct;
7. Software to measure – case management software;
8. Key Performance Indicators (KPI) how are you going to measure what you are doing – evaluation tools need to be specified;
9. Referral process – how are you going to manage it;
10. Issue log – importance of recording issues and incidents;
11. Understanding the culture of working in prison – learning the etiquette – and using appropriate language and behaviour.

## HEART WORK

- 15.0** Discussion centred around the qualities needed to work effectively and produce positive outcomes for prisoners/ex-prisoners and to think about appropriate measures to support provision. To prioritise what can reasonably be provided was the first stage.
- 15.1** Language and communication is important to remove barriers between people – which can be reduced by cultivating an awareness of cultural norms and differences. Care taken over language and terms of understanding is enhanced by using clear, direct and simple language.
- 15.2** Respecting the uniqueness of people and recognising them as fellow human beings, treating people with respect, while taking into consideration their specific needs and being sensitive to their individuality. Demonstrating these qualities are essential to becoming a reflective and supportive practitioner, which involves both being honest with the self and the client – to develop empathy and listening skills. Aiming to really know the person and see them with the light of God – seeing that of God within them. There is a need to work with people and not try to control people or force interpretations of Islam upon them. From chaplaincy healthcare comes the idea of practicing ‘compassionate presence’ relating to the vital life essence of the individual. Spiritual sickness can manifest as meaninglessness and hopelessness which can encompass guilt, shame, unresolved anger and an inability to trust.
- 15.3** For the practitioner there is a quest to develop a strong devotional life which involves taking care of the self. Taking into consideration the state of the heart is essential to develop as an effective force in other people’s lives - putting into practice the concept of *kidmah* – service to others. Through purification a state of the heart can be transmitted to others via a transmission of spirituality that exudes from pious servants of God and becoming able to see what is sacred in the ordinary. Remembering life is about change – practitioners need to embrace change and be prepared to welcome changes into their lives. Spiritual problems can be alleviated by presence, conversation, ritual and prayer.
- 15.4** Honesty - recognising that due to our own previous experiences or personal limitations some volunteers/practitioners must acknowledge that they are not able to deal with certain types of people or the crimes involved are too painful to deal with. Here issues of prejudice and privilege must also be checked and examined. A shadow side of privilege may make it more difficult to understand people from lower income and disadvantaged backgrounds.

**15.5** Networking – support can be extended by building connections by going beyond the immediate community support systems. Create networks in localities including statutory and voluntary sectors in local areas – involving consultation and mentoring. Of vital importance is the need to organise collaboration and partnership and find similar organisational familiarity to extend reach and competency.

**15.6** Setting up a dialogue of convert care within Muslim communities and wider society.

- Demanding space, acknowledgement and recognition;
- Special preference;
- Convert-centric approach – care to be directed by established converts.





## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

- 16.1** The reasons underpinning conversion to Islam in prison are many and varied as are the trajectories that have led people to come into contact with the penal system. As Muslims, a primary role in life is to bring benefit to the lives of others, *maslahah*, particularly, to those less fortunate than ourselves, and live a life in service to God which manifests as *khidmah* (service to others). While the report details the complexity of need, it also highlights a range of pioneering projects from around the UK which provide blueprints to meet some of the huge demand for help and assistance that exist, demonstrating that change can be achieved through the dedicated leadership of determined and dynamic men and women. It is to these people that the Muslim community can turn to as guides and role models for implementing a diversity of projects which are so desperately required.
- 16.2** It is hoped that the weekend's discussions will translate into more than just another talking shop and that ideas and inspiration generated, will be harnessed to enable some of those in a position to take action, to represent the change they wish to see, or to encourage others to establish services, to seek the ways and means to make a constructive difference to the lives of prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families as they journey into Islam.
- 16.3** As mentioned in the Executive Summary to this report it was felt that the aim of the exercise, as an insight into conversion to Islam in Prison and its aftermath, was not met to the degree it was envisioned. Steps are already in place to rectify this and to be able to delve further into the phenomena as a means towards providing greater understanding of the process and its aftermath that will inform those who purport to assist those exiting the system into better lives and futures for themselves and their families.



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