Written evidence submitted by British Pakistani Christian Association

Known objective facts about apostates or converts from Islam in the UK are extremely thin on the ground, and there have been very few published academic research or books – one is ‘The Apostates’ by Simon Cottee, and a young woman from a family of converts to Christianity has recently completed a dissertation on the subject for a post-grad course at a Midlands University, with that dissertation itself commenting that

‘There is also an overwhelming lack of academic and political literature on apostasy in a Western context, with the majority of literature adapted from news articles and religious organisations’ reports’.

The most common directions of conversion appear to be to Christianity, and to atheism / secular humanism, or similar positions of unbelief; however, converting to Buddhism is not uncommon too. The number of ‘apostates’ is not really known, for a number of reasons. Firstly, strong anecdotal evidence shows that there are many closet or cryptic apostates in Muslim communities – those who don’t go to mosque at all, or keep any of the laws and have, at most, a vague or generic belief in God. The repeated testimony of those who do openly leave Islam is that there is a huge gulf in community attitudes towards those who are merely ‘bad Muslims’ and those who have openly or formally made the break and declared themselves Christian, or atheist, or ‘ex-Muslim’. (This is not unique to Islam – for instance, in ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, many who have become ‘Messianic Jews’, or disciples of Jesus, will remain in the community and practice their faith covertly, as although they don’t face death threats, they can face extreme ostracism.) Some do this by moving away from their family or community, and not saying they have left Islam. Sometimes even devout Christian converts who have moved to a new area will simply let their new neighbours assume they are Muslim – Nissar Hussain who has recently had to flee Bradford is one who did that for a few years, and when he did go public, the extreme persecution started up again.

Many apostates remain fearful for their lives, and cautious in the extreme. Both Christian and secular ex-Muslim groups carefully vet potential new members because they report facing efforts by radical Muslims to infiltrate them. Christian charities offering help by operating safe houses for converts or those fleeing forced marriages are organized on a cell level, so that even if one house or cell is infiltrated, those involved have no knowledge of others. They also operate vetting, and, reportedly, strict rules. The reason for this is that one of the biggest challenges faced by apostates or ex-Muslims is the loss of family and social life – intense loneliness, depression and guilt, moving from what had often previously been warm and supportive family structures to empty lives and flats and calendars – they had suddenly moved from the plus to the negative side of the honour-shame culture. People involved in such vetting have pointed to cases where tangential connections that were kept on were used to lure ‘renegade’ family members back in for forced marriages or violence and even honour killings by telling tales of desires for reconciliation or parents being very ill (again, no-one can really pin down figures, but there is general agreement that a significant number of honour killings, particularly of women, are in whole or in part because they have left the Islamic faith). For this reason, the operators of these safe house systems insist for the sake of safety of people in their safe houses that all contact with their old life is completely severed. They also have told BPCA researchers that as a matter of policy, anyone involved in sheltering apostates should not
let their location be known to police, as people with security connections have told them that likely
every police force has been infiltrated, and it just takes one person with access to the database to
compromise their location, and that at least one police force apparently has something of an
unwritten police of actively telling Muslim families the location of underage family members when
they know it. Additionally they have said that many mosques operate what amounts to a very small
secret police force, an individual or individuals to whom Muslims may go when they suspect the
activities of a family member. These function as cells that talk to each other. They said that it is not
uncommon when social services move a child or vulnerable person from their Muslim home to
somewhere a considerable distance away, that within a few days Asian men will be on the street
where the person has been placed, asking after them. A BPCA researcher has had a social worker
independently confirm that this is often the case.

Apostates (in this case converts to Christianity) who have been able or willing to talk have told BPCA
researchers that many converts operate in the shadows, moving every couple of months, and there
are anecdotal reports of name changes and even in one or two cases new National Insurance
Numbers.

Additional difficulties in ascertaining the numbers of apostates in the UK is the fact that significant
numbers of asylum seekers or refugees are, or claim to be, converts from Islam, mainly to
Christianity. The authorities believe, possibly not without reason, that some of these are fakes trying
to boost their chances in asylum claims, but undoubtedly many are genuine. In some cases they
have converted whilst in their own countries, in other cases after they have arrived in the West.
There are widespread and ongoing reports from across Europe, including in the UK, that Christians
refugees, whether converts or not, routinely face violence, ostracism, discrimination and sexual
assault in refugee centres and in the actual asylum apparatus itself (for example, having to flee for
their lives accommodation provided by the state in Sweden, and find their own private
accommodation).

The Council of Ex Muslims of Britain say they offer help to about 350 apostates a year who approach
them – these are likely to be mostly atheists / agnostics / humanists. One Islamic researcher
estimates that that of the approximately 10,000 who convert to Islam each year (mainly women)
about 5,000 will have left the faith within a few years – and this doesn’t include those who were
born Muslim but leave the faith. By this reckoning, numbers of ‘apostates’ of various forms and
persuasions number at least in the high 10’s of 1000’s.

Whilst we cannot give any better idea of numbers, for all the above reasons, the testimony of these
‘apostates’, whether converts to Christianity, humanism, atheism or other religions show significant
common patterns. Their experiences should be read against surveys that have shown that about 1/3
of all UK Muslims believe that apostates should be killed as per Sharia law.

Even those who report that their immediate family was relatively accepting say that their families
were emphatic about hiding their new status from the wider family and community for fear both of
the shame, and potential ostracism and detrimental effects to siblings and the like, but also because
of fear of violence. However, very often it is the immediate family who react violently and
vehemently – ranging from extreme verbal shaming, death threats or saying ‘You are dead to us’ or
‘It would be better if you had died’, pressure based about the dishonour to the family name, guilt-
tripping over adverse affects to parents health, attempts to control by seizing mobile phones or
passports, beatings, keeping them locked up, knifes to the throat, evicting them from the house. As we noted earlier, in some cases, tangential connections kept – for instance, through cousins or family friends – can be used to entice lonely apostates back to face violence or murder in so called ‘honour violence’.

The same often applies to extended family, and also to friends – friends who realize that the apostasy is real and not a joke are often reported to start abusing, cursing and threatening such apostates.

All of this does not take into account harassment and attacks by radical extremists, which can also happen. Some apostates, particularly those who have spoken out, report getting well over 100 death threats.

Anecdotally, many converts report little understanding about their situation from the authorities, and many, certainly amongst converts to Christianity, condemn the culture of multi-culturalism as being part of the cause of this lack of awareness and help.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a particularly strong move to Christianity among Iranians. Some apostates or converts to Christianity among Iranians, and other groups, feel able to be quite open about their faith, but occasionally even then there are problems. Exceptionally even then there can be problems. BPCA researchers are aware of one case where a young Iranian convert in a Northern University city was on door-greeting duty in their local church when an apparently quintessentially English couple entered and got friendly, so this young convert told them the story of their conversion. It turned out they were Iranian intelligence who had targeted her because of a family member who was in a senior government funded position. We understand the young convert had to flee the UK, along with their family.

One other trend that converts point to as a reason for their increasingly precarious position is that communities have gradually stopped self-identifying by culture or origin (Bengali, etc), and now self-identify as Islamic above all – communities are increasingly religious.

Summary:

The number of apostates in the UK is unknown but at a very minimum is in the high 10’s of 1000’s.

The majority convert to non-belief or Christianity.

Whilst a somewhat small proportion appear to face relatively few difficulties, many face extreme ostracism, death threats, abuse, violence, vicious verbal abuse, and even actual murder from family and community. They also often suffer from depression, guilt, shame and loneliness. Some feel forced to live in the shadows, in effect on the run, or to move away from their home community, and a few end up in safe houses.
Websites or news articles that offer potentially useful examples and background:

http://ex-muslim.org.uk/

http://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/02/how-liberal-britain-is-betraying-ex-muslims/


http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1571970/Muslim-apostates-threatened-over-Christianity.html

http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/allah-vs-atheism-leaving-islam-was-the-hardest-thing-i-ve-done-9069598.html

http://www.newstatesman.com/religion/2013/05/confessions-ex-muslim

http://www.itv.com/presscentre/ep1week41/exposure-islams-non-believers

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34357047

https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/4160/the-importance-of-being-ex-muslim

https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/4126/my-apostasy-story-anonymous