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Factors Driving Religious Conversion: A Case Study of *Mualaf* in Surabaya

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Abstract

This study investigates the underlying factors influencing religious conversion to Islam in Surabaya, employing a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with individuals who had converted from various religious backgrounds, including Catholicism, Hinduism, Agnosticism, and one former Christian pastor, alongside leaders and members of the Mualaf Center Surabaya (*Rumah Singgah Mualaf*). The findings identify three primary pathways to conversion: (1) theological and intellectual exploration driven by doctrinal doubts or existential crises; (2) spiritual and mystical experiences, often involving dreams or emotional resonance with Islamic teachings; and (3) pragmatic and relational influences, including legal circumstances such as divorce, peer encouragement, and responses to social exclusion. These pathways reflect the complex interplay of cognitive, affective, and sociocultural dimensions in the conversion process. The study concludes that religious conversion is not a singular or linear event but a multifaceted and contextually embedded transformation shaped by intertwined personal and social catalysts.

Keywords: Religious Conversion; Case Study; Mualaf; Theological Crisis; Social Influence

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of religious conversion, defined as the shift of belief from one religion to another, represents one of the most fundamental and personal aspects of human experience. In Indonesia, a country constitutionally recognizing religious plurality, the dynamics of conversion to Islam—the process of becoming mualaf—constitute a significant and continuously evolving socio-religious reality. Research on this phenomenon is no longer confined to rural areas or isolated communities but has become an important part of urban life dynamics in major cities.

Surabaya, as the second-largest metropolitan city in Indonesia, serves as an ideal "laboratory" for studying how modern individuals navigate and negotiate their religious identities. Structured da'wah activities and mualaf guidance, particularly through institutions such as the Mualaf Center, demonstrate that this phenomenon has developed into an established and socially organized movement (Wahyuni, 2018).

Academically, the study of religious conversion has long been a complex and multidimensional discourse. Existing literature is generally divided into two primary focuses that are often analyzed separately. The first focus concerns the antecedents, which are the factors driving an individual's decision to convert. Dianto (2022) summarized this academic debate by categorizing the factors into two major groups: internal and external factors. Internal factors include motivations originating within the individual, such as existential frustration, psychological upheaval, and the search for authentic and profound spiritual experiences. These factors highlight the psychological and emotional dimensions as primary motivations for changing beliefs.

In contrast, external factors encompass influences from the individual's surrounding environment, including social pressure, interactions with religious organizations, and significant personal relationships, particularly interfaith marriage, which is often considered a catalyst for conversion. These external factors demonstrate the crucial role that social and relational contexts play in the conversion process. Understanding both dimensions is essential to depicting religious conversion as a phenomenon that is not solely individual but also deeply social and contextual.

Phenomenological studies often emphasize the concept of a "pure spiritual quest" or hidayah as the primary motivator in the religious conversion process. Haris (2024), in his research on mualaf in Sorong, identified that the decisive factors for conversion were

guidance from a mysterious spiritual figure and direct hidayah experiences that deeply move the heart. This finding aligns with the study by Rahmawati and Desiningrum (2020), which applied Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine converts whose conversions were not driven by marriage. They concluded that for this group, the conversion process was grounded in attraction and value congruence, involving internal aspects such as cognitive processes and personal will, alongside the external influence of their social environment.

This phenomenon can be understood as part of a broader "spiritual quest" trend within contemporary Indonesia, where individuals actively seek spiritual meaning beyond formal ritual boundaries. Consistent with Muttaqin's (2012) perspective, this search reflects a religious paradigm shift emphasizing personal experience and spiritual authenticity over conventional ritual practice. It suggests that conversion is not merely a normative decision but a complex existential journey involving dynamic interactions between individual and social dimensions within the modern religious context.

The literature on motivations for religious conversion often identifies pragmatic factors as dominant drivers, especially in the context of marriage. Hudriansyah (2018), for instance, in his study of Toraja migrants, revealed that the primary motive for changing religion was a practical-pragmatic one centered on marriage. Another study specifically discusses the legal implications and guidance for mualaf whose conversions are driven by marriage (Zaman et al., 2024). However, the rigid dichotomy between "pure spiritual" motives and "pragmatic/marriage" motives tends to oversimplify the complex reality. Hudriansyah (2018) himself noted that although marriage is the main motive, beliefs in direct hidayah from Allah, environmental influences, and family support are interrelated factors that mutually affect the conversion process.

Phenomenological research by Adnan et al. (2017) in Garut enriches this understanding by distinguishing between "past-oriented motives," which include marriage, and "future-oriented motives," encompassing aspirations for enlightenment and ultimate happiness in the hereafter. This approach highlights that conversion is not merely a reaction to external or practical factors but also involves teleological dimensions related to an individual's spiritual and existential goals. It reveals the temporal and spatial complexity and dynamic nature of motivations experienced by mualaf.

The second focus in the literature is on what happens post-conversion, including adaptation challenges and the role of institutional support. Studies by Juwairiani et al. (2024) and Sumawan and Surya (2023) emphasize that mualaf often face significant psychological and social challenges, such as family rejection and social ostracism from former environments. These conditions compel them to develop effective religious coping strategies to adjust to their new spiritual identity while maintaining psychological well-being.

Institutional roles in facilitating this adaptation process are critical. Studies in Surabaya, such as those by Hakiki (2014) at Al Falah Mosque and Hartini (2025) at Yayasan Nurul Hayat, focus on structured post-conversion guidance and religious behavior development strategies. These institutional approaches provide systematic spiritual and social support to facilitate the integration of mualaf into the Muslim community and help them overcome the complex identity and social challenges they face.

Although literature on guidance and mentoring in Surabaya is available, there remains a gap in research that specifically and deeply examines the initial driving factors that lead mualaf to these institutions. This study aims to fill that gap. Utilizing in-depth qualitative data from mualaf affiliated with the Mualaf Center Surabaya (Rumah Singgah Mualaf) as well as other mualaf in Surabaya, the study exclusively focuses on the question: What are the dominant factors driving the conversion process of the mualaf in Surabaya?

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design selected to thoroughly explore the unique experiences, processes, and personal meanings behind religious conversion holistically and comprehensively (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018). This approach is particularly appropriate as conversion is a complex personal journey involving psychological, theological, and social dimensions that quantitative methods cannot adequately capture. The case study allows an in-depth understanding of how and why conversion decisions occur within the real-life contexts of participants, providing a rich and contextualized perspective.

Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with seven purposively sampled participants who had converted to Islam and possessed diverse religious, social backgrounds and conversion pathways. This sampling aimed to capture a broad spectrum of experiences, ranging from religious leaders to laypersons, and from various previous beliefs,

thus enriching the data variety and quality (Safrudin et al., 2023). Full informed consent was obtained from all participants to uphold ethical research standards.

The participants represented a heterogeneous group, including the leader of the Mualaf Center Surabaya, a former devout Catholic, a former Catholic priest with formal theological studies in the Vatican, and individuals from Hindu, Protestant, and agnostic backgrounds. This diversity enabled a rich analysis of different conversion dynamics, reflecting various driving factors and challenges experienced in the faith transition process. Detailed participant descriptions provide the necessary context to understand the research findings (Sugiyono, 2017).

In addition to primary data, the study integrated secondary data sourced from literature reviews, academic journals, and previous theses relevant to religious conversion, psychology of converts, and Islamic development programs in Indonesia. This combination broadened the theoretical foundation and validated findings by situating them within previous scholarly work, enabling a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Rosidah et al., 2023).

Data analysis utilized thematic analysis through five systematic stages: verbatim transcription of interviews, coding to identify meaningful units related to conversion drivers, theme searching by grouping similar codes, theme reviewing for internal coherence and external validity, and finally, theme definition and naming presented in the results and discussion sections (Kusumastuti & Khoiron, 2021). This structured approach yielded well-organized insights into the processes and dynamics of religious conversion.

RESULTS

In-depth interview data analysis reveals that the conversion process is not dominated by a single factor but rather constitutes a complex and dynamic personal journey. This process can be categorized into three distinct but often overlapping driving pathways. First, the theological crisis and intellectual quest involve critical doubts toward prior beliefs and reflective efforts to establish a more rationally convincing faith foundation.

Second, the spiritual search and personal (mystical) experiences form a powerful pathway where profound emotional and spiritual moments trigger faith transformation. Third, pragmatic and relational triggers encompass social and situational conditions

influencing individuals' conversion decisions, such as social pressure, family dynamics, or practical needs prompting the search for new beliefs. The interplay of these three pathways underscores that conversion is not a linear process but a multifaceted journey involving cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions simultaneously.

Theological Crisis and Intellectual Quest

The dominant theme emerging primarily from participants with strong Christian/Catholic religious education backgrounds is that intense theological crises and intellectual quests drive the conversion process. For this group, conversion is not an instant emotional event but a logical conclusion resulting from critical doubts, comparative studies, and profound reflections on the dogmas of their former religions (Ismail et al., 2024). This pathway highlights that intellectual and epistemological processes lie at the core of faith transformation (Fatihaturrohmah & Ichsan, 2019), where individuals experience tension between the rational need for logical explanation and the acceptance of authoritative dogma.

Participant AD, the leader of the Mualaf Center and a former devout Catholic, exemplifies a cognitive crisis triggered by contradictions between Catholic religious practices and sacred texts during his formal catechumen education. He perceived inconsistency between the "Ten Commandments" and the practice of praying before statues, which sparked deep doubt. When his questions were met with dogmatic answers, his dissatisfaction accentuated his skepticism. This epistemological conflict exposes the tension between the search for logos (rationality) and dogma (unquestionable authority). His critical observation of discrepancies among the four Gospels further deepened his doubt, underscoring that intellectual crisis was the main catalyst for his conversion.

AD's case aligns with the concept of the "cognitive process" grounded in attraction and value congruence Rahmawati and Desiningrum, 2020), where critical reflection and the search for logical consistency constitute an active process of doctrinal evaluation. His post-conversion experience reveals a significant gap in religious guidance for new converts, motivating him to establish the Mualaf Center / *Rumah Singgah Mualaf* to provide more adequate support. It suggests that the intellectual journey extends beyond personal decision-making to the creation of social systems that assist others similarly.

The experience of BS, a former Catholic priest with extensive theological education, adds another dimension to this intellectual pathway. His formal education and deep theological understanding, including advanced studies in the Vatican, denote high intellectual

authority. Paradoxically, this deep knowledge fueled his doubts about the truth of his former faith. He harbored specific, technical doubts related to key biblical concepts, indicating that the intellectual process operates profoundly and critically.

BS explained that the deeper he studied Christianity, the stronger his doubts became, and his discovery of the Quran's existence in 52 languages at the Vatican Library became a pivotal moment, shaking the foundations of his beliefs. This revelation portrays conversion as a product of intellectual acuity and systematic searching, challenging common narratives that depict conversion as merely emotional or rooted in ignorance.

Cases like AD and BS demonstrate that conversion to Islam can represent a rational conclusion from extended theological and intellectual reflection. For them, Islam was not stumbled upon by chance but reached as a logical destination when former dogmas could no longer be accepted logically. It challenges stereotypes viewing conversion as a product of ignorance or religious manipulation and shows that deep knowledge and quest for truth can serve as primary motivators (Viswanathan, 2021).

The theological crisis and intellectual quest pathway offers crucial insights into the study of religious conversion, affirming that faith formed through this process has a strong rational and reflective foundation. Therefore, this research significantly contributes to understanding conversion as a complex cognitive process laden with meaning while offering implications for religious institutions to provide guidance informed by intellectual understanding and converts' spiritual needs.

Spiritual Quest and Personal (Mystical) Experience

Distinctly different from the intellectual pathway, the second pathway in the process of religious conversion is driven by personal spiritual experiences that touch upon emotional, affective, and mystical dimensions. Participants following this pathway do not begin their conversion through doctrinal critique or comparative scripture study. Instead, they are motivated by a "calling" or transcendental experience, which they interpret as a form of "guidance" (Haris, 2024). This approach emphasizes the primacy of inner spiritual experiences as the main trigger for belief transformation.

A concrete example is found in the narrative of EK, a participant from a Hindu background in Bali. His conversion experience was primarily sensory and affective, starting

with an emotional attraction to the adhan (call to prayer). EK recounted that his interest arose upon hearing the adhan, which inspired him to join the ritual practice, such as performing ablution and following the prayer movements. Only after these stages did he develop a cognitive interest in learning more about Islam.

Analysis of EK's experience reveals three sequential stages, distinctly contrasting with the intellectual route. The first stage is an affective one, characterized by an emotional response to the adhan. The second stage involves behavioral action, such as engaging in *wudlu* and prayer movements. The final stage involves rational and reflective interest to deepen Islamic understanding. This model reflects a "search for self-authenticity" where spiritual experience precedes doctrinal comprehension (Blackshear, 2018). The phenomenological approach is fitting for illustrating this experience because it focuses on personal consciousness and subjective meaning (Rahmawati & Desiningrum, 2020).

A more mystical experience is presented by Budi Santoso, an agnostic with Protestant and Hindu family backgrounds. His trigger was existential anxiety before the birth of his child, prompting a resolve to find the "true religion." His search did not involve textual study but rather syncretic spiritual practice rooted in Javanese *Kejawen* traditions, such as fasting for 40 days and personal prayer. On the 38th day, he had a vivid dream in which two handsome youths visited and offered him a transcendent gift—the verse from the Qur'an, Surah Al-Lahab. This dream was so powerful that upon awakening, he immediately instructed his assistant to purchase a Qur'an and investigate the content of the vision.

BS's case is particularly interesting as it demonstrates how an individual can utilize a non-Islamic cultural framework—namely, *Kejawen* practices—to arrive at an Islamic monotheistic conclusion. The dream functioned as an undeniable transcendental proof for him, surpassing any need for rational theological debate. This finding indicates that transcendental and symbolic experiences can serve as crucial bridges in personal and holistic religious conversion processes.

These narratives illustrate how spiritual and emotional pathways can play a central role in religious conversion alongside rational and intellectual routes. It underscores the importance of interdisciplinary studies linking psychology of religion, phenomenology, and cultural anthropology to deepen the understanding of the complex spiritual experiences underpinning individual belief transformations (Ghrabi, 2025).

DISCUSSION

Pragmatic and Relational Trigger Factors

The final pathway in the religious conversion process involves pragmatic-relational factors, where the decision to convert is triggered or accelerated by social situations, interpersonal relationships, or practical needs. Although previous literature often highlights marriage as the primary pragmatic factor (Ghrabi, 2025; Zaman et al., 2024), the current research data reveal a broader and more complex range of practical and relational aspects.

The case of TS, originating from Ambon with a Catholic background, exemplifies how family law issues can act as significant catalysts in conversion decisions. Beyond unelaborated theological doubts, her main trigger was the difficulty in obtaining a divorce due to the Catholic Church's stringent rules, which require the Vatican's intervention. Tesa recounted that her request to her local pastor was rejected with the biblical justification that "what God has joined together, no one should separate."

This pragmatic-legalistic rejection served as an external pressure prompting TS to explore alternative religious solutions, eventually leading her to Islam. This case illustrates that the inability of the original religion to provide practical solutions to real-life problems—divorce in this instance—can act as a principal push factor in conversion. Hence, the definition of pragmatic factors must extend beyond marriage to include family law issues and other practical needs (Orivares, 2022).

Furthermore, the relational dimension is explicitly evident in the case of CO, TS's child. CO's conversion was a direct reaction to her mother's religious shift, which caused social ostracism of the family. Before her mother converted, CO was an active church servant, but after TS embraced Islam, CO faced rejection and hostility within the church community. She expressed her experience of feeling alienated and choosing to "hijrah" to Islam to restore her relationship with her mother.

CO's case illustrates a complex psychosocial and relational conversion dynamic. Unlike conversion cases motivated by theological crises, such as AD, or personal spiritual quests like EK, CO's conversion was driven by a relational crisis. She faced a choice between her ostracized church community and joining her mother. Her decision underscores how social rejection and family relational needs can profoundly influence conversion processes.

A subtler relational factor is also present in AD's case. Although primarily motivated by a theological crisis, AD was initially influenced by interaction with a classmate who gave him a book titled "The Qur'an Speaks about Christianity." It highlights the importance of social-interpersonal interactions as initial triggers in religious journeys. Similarly, AG, a Chinese-Indonesian born Muslim, converted temporarily to Christianity due to relational and economic pressures from his uncle, who threatened to withhold financial support if AG did not attend church. AG's return to Islam also reflects significant familial relational dynamics impacting religious affiliation.

Taken together, these findings contribute to expanding our understanding of pragmatic-relational factors in religious conversion. It is not only marriage or theological considerations that matter, but also a range of legal, social, and practical needs that play central roles. This integrative approach allows a more holistic comprehension of the complexities involved in conversion within real-life contexts (Taylor, 2021). This study emphasizes the importance of considering specific social and legal contexts in conversion research better to capture underexplored driving factors (Gngui, 2024). This deeper exploration of pragmatic-relational influences opens avenues for further study, particularly regarding the effects of social ostracism and family pressures as critical variables in religious dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study reflects that the process of conversion to Islam in Surabaya is a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be explained by a single factor alone. The three main driving pathways— theological-intellectual, spiritual-experiential, and pragmatic-relational— dynamically interact and often overlap in shaping individuals' decisions to embrace Islam. Furthermore, post-conversion challenges such as social exclusion emerge as secondary motivational contexts that require attention. These findings underscore the critical role of convert-support institutions like the '*Rumah Singgah Mualaf* / Mualaf Shelter House,' which serve not only as sources of religious education but also as essential social support systems to help converts navigate their complex spiritual journeys with contextualized and comprehensive assistance.

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