



## Reconstructing Theological Identity in Interreligious Conversion: An Interpretive Study of Lived Faith

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### ABSTRACT

Religious conversion represents a profound area of study within comparative theology, exploring how individuals reinterpret faith through spiritual and existential transformation. Within this broader discourse, the phenomenological exploration of theological identity reconstruction has become increasingly important in understanding how belief evolves in pluralistic societies. However, previous studies have largely emphasized sociological and psychological dimensions of conversion, leaving the lived theological meaning of this transformation insufficiently explored. This study employs a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to investigate how individuals experience, interpret, and embody the process of faith reconstruction following conversion. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight participants from diverse religious backgrounds and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to uncover themes of inner awakening, dialogical encounter, and spiritual integration. The findings reveal that conversion is not a rupture from previous belief systems but a continuous interpretive journey involving reflection, relational transformation, and renewed divine intimacy. Through this interpretive process, participants redefined their understanding of faith as an existential and relational experience rather than an institutional realignment. This study's unique contribution lies in its explicit focus on the lived theological meaning of conversion, extending beyond sociological and psychological analyses by highlighting how faith reconstruction unfolds as a dialogical and interpretive act of meaning-making. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its small and context-specific sample size, which may constrain the generalizability of findings. Future research could broaden participant diversity or employ comparative approaches to further examine theological identity reconstruction across varied religious traditions.



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## INTRODUCTION

Religious experience has long been recognized as one of the most profound dimensions of human existence, shaping identity, moral orientation, and interpersonal relationships across cultures and historical epochs. In contemporary pluralistic societies, individuals are increasingly exposed to diverse systems of belief, theological discourse, and spiritual practices (Elnakouri & McGregor, 2023). This exposure often initiates complex processes of reflection, reinterpretation, and transformation of faith. The phenomenon of religious conversion—particularly the inner experience of spiritual and theological reconstruction—represents a deeply personal yet socially contextualized event that transcends institutional boundaries and doctrinal frameworks.

The study of conversion has traditionally been approached through sociological, psychological, or anthropological lenses, emphasizing behavioral change, community affiliation, or cognitive adaptation (Hamid, 2024). While these perspectives provide valuable insights into the external dimensions of conversion, they often overlook the subjective and existential core of the experience: the inner transformation of meaning, identity, and relationship with the divine (Mukhlis, 2025a). In many interreligious contexts, conversion is not merely an act of adopting a new set of

beliefs but a reorientation of consciousness—a process of rediscovering one’s spiritual authenticity amid multiple traditions of faith.

In an age characterized by religious pluralism, interfaith dialogue, and global mobility, such transformations have become increasingly prevalent and complex (Bosanquet, 2024). Individuals navigating between religious identities encounter profound tensions between inherited traditions and emergent interpretations of divine truth (Morrissey, 2023). This dynamic produces a fertile ground for phenomenological inquiry, as it highlights how theological understanding is lived, experienced, and interpreted through the lens of personal spirituality.

Given these conditions, there is a growing need to explore religious conversion not as a doctrinal shift, but as an experiential and interpretative phenomenon that reveals the evolving relationship between the human and the transcendent (Mukhlis, 2025b). A phenomenological approach, grounded in the exploration of lived experience, offers the most suitable framework for uncovering the essence of this transformation—how individuals perceive, interpret, and reconstruct their theological identity in the process of conversion.

Within the broader discourse on religious experience, the study of individual encounters with conversion and theological transformation has emerged as a crucial subfield in both comparative religion and phenomenological theology (Lim, 2023). This focus on lived experience emphasizes the need to understand religion not as a static system of doctrines, but as a dynamic process of meaning-making that unfolds through consciousness and personal reflection (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Scholars in recent decades have turned toward phenomenology to uncover how spiritual transformation is experienced, interpreted, and embodied by individuals within specific cultural and interreligious contexts.

Despite the growing scholarly interest, methodological challenges persist in exploring the subjective dimensions of religious experience (Mitchell et al., 2023). Quantitative approaches, while effective in measuring behavioral or demographic trends in conversion, often fail to capture the depth of emotional, existential, and theological meaning inherent in such transformations. These methods tend to reduce complex inner experiences to measurable variables, neglecting the interpretive process through which individuals construct and negotiate their understanding of the divine (Adipraya & Harahap, 2024). Similarly, sociological analyses—though valuable for situating conversion within communal and institutional frameworks—frequently overlook the phenomenological essence of faith: the inward, reflective engagement through which individuals reconstitute their theological identity.

This methodological limitation underscores the necessity of a qualitative and interpretive framework capable of engaging with the inner structures of consciousness and the language of meaning (Ram, 2023). Phenomenology, particularly in its hermeneutic form, provides such a lens by allowing the researcher to move beyond description toward interpretation—illuminating how the experience of conversion manifests as an existential dialogue between belief, identity, and divine encounter. Through this approach, the research seeks to address a critical gap in the existing literature: the need to articulate the essence of lived theology as it emerges from the personal narratives of faith transformation within pluralistic and dialogical religious environments.

Existing studies on religious conversion and theological transformation have predominantly relied on established practical approaches, such as sociological mapping of conversion patterns, psychological models of religious motivation, or comparative analyses of belief systems (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). While these frameworks provide structured accounts of behavioral change and contextual influences, they tend to privilege observable dimensions of conversion over the inner experience of spiritual transformation (Simard-Émond, 2023). As a result, they offer a surface-level understanding of conversion as a social or cognitive process rather than as a deeply lived theological event.

These prevailing methodologies face a critical limitation: they are insufficient in capturing the subjective texture of faith—the reflective, affective, and existential meanings through which individuals interpret their encounters with the divine (Rizzo, 2025). Quantitative and behavioral paradigms reduce complex spiritual phenomena to external indicators, obscuring the ways in which

belief, doubt, and revelation are experienced and interpreted at the personal level (Datta et al., 2023). Consequently, the existing body of research remains largely silent on how individuals reconfigure their theological identity and sense of sacred belonging through lived experience.

To bridge this gap, a phenomenological approach is essential. By focusing on the lived meanings of religious conversion as experienced from the first-person perspective, phenomenology provides a means of accessing the depth of spiritual consciousness and the interpretive processes that accompany faith transformation (Rasmussen, 2023). In particular, hermeneutic phenomenology—through its interpretative engagement with narrative and reflection—enables a holistic understanding of conversion as both an existential journey and a theological reconstruction. This study thus addresses a significant lacuna in current scholarship: the absence of phenomenologically grounded inquiry into how individuals experience, interpret, and integrate spiritual transformation within their personal and interreligious contexts.

Recent research on religious experience and conversion has highlighted the growing interest in understanding how individuals interpret and live their faith within pluralistic societies. Studies such as those by (Kahraman & Aydingün, 2025; Vähä-Savo & Koivuluhta, 2025) have emphasized that conversion is not merely a sociological or psychological event but an experiential process involving identity, reflection, and relational transformation. Theoretical perspectives from phenomenology and hermeneutics have provided a philosophical foundation for exploring how spiritual meaning is constructed through lived experience and interpretation (Sabri, 2025). Yet, few studies have examined how these dynamics manifest within interreligious contexts where faith is continually redefined through dialogue and existential reflection.

Building upon these insights, the present study adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to uncover the essence of theological identity reconstruction among individuals who have undergone religious conversion (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). This method was selected because it privileges subjective experience as the primary source of knowledge and meaning (Milner, 2023). By interpreting participants' narratives through reflective analysis, the study seeks to address the gap identified earlier—how faith is experienced and reinterpreted during the process of conversion (Monteiro de Barros et al., 2024). The phenomenological lens allows the research to move beyond surface-level explanations and to explore how spiritual transformation is both lived and understood in the consciousness of believers.

The article is structured as follows: the Introduction presents the conceptual and empirical background, establishing the significance of studying religious conversion as an experiential phenomenon (Sail & Priya, 2023). The Method section details the hermeneutic phenomenological framework, including participant selection, data collection, and interpretative analysis. The Results section presents emergent themes derived from lived experiences of conversion, while the Discussion elaborates on the theological and existential implications of these findings (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Finally, the Conclusion highlights the study's contribution to comparative theology and phenomenological inquiry into spiritual transformation.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

The study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences and theological transformations of individuals who underwent religious conversion. This approach was chosen because phenomenology allows for an in-depth understanding of human experience as it is subjectively perceived, focusing on the meanings constructed through consciousness and reflection.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, rooted in Heidegger's philosophy, emphasizes interpretation (*Verstehen*) as a central mode of inquiry, viewing experience as embedded within historical, cultural, and spiritual contexts. Within this framework, the research design sought to reveal the essential structures of spiritual transformation and the reconstruction of theological identity by interpreting participants' narratives through both phenomenological reduction and reflective interpretation.

This design was appropriate for the study's objective, as it facilitated an exploration of how faith transitions are experienced internally—beyond institutional or doctrinal changes—illuminating the existential and theological dimensions of conversion.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of individuals who had experienced a significant change in religious belief or theological orientation within the past five years. Selection followed a purposive sampling approach to ensure that participants possessed direct, lived experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

Inclusion criteria required participants to (1) be adults aged 25–55; (2) have undergone a recognized process of religious conversion or reorientation; and (3) be capable of articulating reflective insight into their spiritual experiences. Individuals who had experienced coercive or externally imposed conversions were excluded to maintain the authenticity of voluntary spiritual transformation.

The final group comprised eight participants—five males and three females—from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, representing Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and interfaith spiritual movements. Their average age was 37 years. This diversity provided a rich spectrum of interreligious perspectives and ensured depth in exploring the theological meanings of conversion.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' inner experiences during their conversion process. An interview guide containing open-ended questions encouraged participants to describe their spiritual encounters, moments of doubt, divine experiences, and reflections on identity transformation.

Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, conducted either face-to-face or via secure video conferencing to accommodate participants' geographical dispersion. The interviews took place in quiet, private environments to ensure comfort and confidentiality. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim.

The semi-structured format provided both flexibility and focus—allowing participants to narrate freely while ensuring alignment with the central research question: the subjective meaning of theological identity reconstruction. Reflexive notes were maintained to capture contextual nuances and emotional tones during the conversations.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which emphasizes the dual process of phenomenological description and interpretative understanding. The analytic procedure involved several systematic steps:

**Immersion in Data:** Each transcript was read multiple times to achieve an empathetic understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

**Identification of Meaning Units:** Key phrases, expressions, and metaphors reflecting theological transformation were extracted and coded.

**Theme Development:** Related codes were grouped into emergent themes that captured the essence of spiritual awakening, reflection, and transformation.

**Hermeneutic Interpretation:** Themes were examined within their broader theological and existential contexts, integrating participants' narratives with interpretive reflection.

**Synthesis of Essential Structures:** The final stage involved articulating the essential meanings that represent the shared core of conversion experiences.

NVivo 14 software was used to assist in the organization and cross-referencing of themes, though interpretative insights remained grounded in the researcher's engagement with the data. This

analytic process maintained fidelity to phenomenological rigor by balancing descriptive accuracy with interpretive depth.

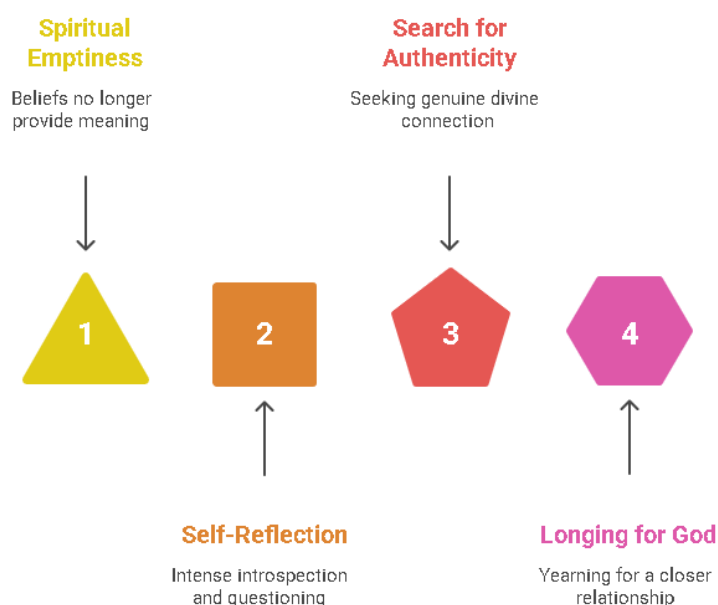
## RESULTS

### The Inner Awakening — Confronting Spiritual Emptiness

Participants consistently described the beginning of their conversion experience as a deep confrontation with spiritual emptiness—a moment when previously held beliefs no longer provided existential meaning. This phase was marked by intense self-reflection and a search for divine authenticity. One participant recalled:

“I realized that my prayers had become mere words. I was seeking God, but the God I knew felt distant. It was not rebellion; it was longing.”

#### Conversion Experience



This awakening often emerged from moments of crisis, such as personal loss, philosophical doubt, or social alienation. The sense of inner disruption acted as a catalyst for a reorientation of faith, guiding individuals toward a renewed spiritual consciousness. The phenomenological essence here lies in the paradox between absence and presence—where the loss of certainty becomes the threshold for rediscovering transcendence. Beyond descriptive accounts, this theme illustrates an interpretive shift from existential void to theological reorientation. The confrontation with emptiness becomes not merely an emotional reaction but a hermeneutic event—where participants reinterpret divine absence as an invitation to rediscover the sacred through self-reflective faith.

### The Dialogical Encounter — Faith as a Lived Relationship

As participants moved beyond initial disorientation, their narratives revealed an evolving understanding of faith as dialogue rather than doctrine. This stage was characterized by relational encounters—with texts, traditions, and other believers—that facilitated new interpretations of divine presence.

“When I met people of different faiths, I didn’t lose my belief; instead, it became clearer what it truly meant. Their devotion mirrored mine, and in that mirror, I found God again.”

Such dialogical engagement reshaped participants’ theological perspectives, inviting empathy, humility, and openness. Their experiences suggest that conversion is not a rupture but an interfaith encounter—a continuous hermeneutic process of understanding God through the Other.

Analytically, this theme underscores how dialogical faith operates as a dynamic interpretive act: participants move from dogmatic certainty toward relational understanding, transforming their theology from exclusive truth-claims into intersubjective meaning-making. The interpretive depth thus lies in recognizing that conversion unfolds as a dialogical reconfiguration of the self in relation to the divine and the religious Other.

### **Reconstruction of Theological Identity**

Central to the participants' journeys was the reconstruction of theological identity. This process involved reconciling prior doctrines with newly embraced spiritual insights. Conversion, in this sense, was less about rejection and more about reinterpretation.

"I didn't abandon my faith; I redefined it. The symbols remained, but their meanings deepened. My relationship with God became more personal—less institutional, more alive."

Participants described their transformation as a process of hermeneutic self-reconstruction—an inner negotiation between inherited religious narratives and new experiential truths. The use of theological reflection became a means of grounding the phenomenological experience of conversion within a coherent framework of meaning. Interpretively, this stage reveals how identity reconstruction is a reflexive synthesis: participants engage theological language to mediate between tradition and lived experience, transforming doctrine into personal theology. This analytical distinction highlights the agency of the convert as theologian—actively shaping meaning rather than passively receiving belief.

### **Experiencing Divine Presence in the Everyday**

Following the reconfiguration of belief, participants expressed a renewed sense of divine intimacy manifesting in ordinary life. The divine was no longer perceived as distant but immanent within daily encounters, relationships, and actions.

"I used to think spirituality was found only in rituals. Now, every act of kindness feels sacred—each moment is a quiet prayer."

This theme captures the phenomenological essence of being-in-faith—an embodied spirituality where theology is not confined to formal liturgy but emerges through lived experience. Analytically, this shift marks a movement from transcendental abstraction to incarnational faith: participants reinterpret divine presence as immanent within ethical and relational actions. The results suggest a theological phenomenology of everyday life, where faith becomes an enacted awareness of the sacred in the ordinary.

### **Integration and Communal Resonance**

The final stage of the conversion experience reflected a process of integration—where the individual's transformed identity found resonance within a broader spiritual community. For many, sharing their journey became an act of witness and reconciliation.

"I realized my story was not about leaving something behind, but about finding a larger belonging—one that embraces differences as divine diversity."

Through communal affirmation, participants reconnected their personal transformation to collective spirituality, situating their renewed faith within a living theology of inclusion and coexistence. From an analytical standpoint, this integration reveals conversion as a social theology—where personal transformation attains meaning through communal embodiment. The interpretive depth lies in the recognition that faith reconstruction culminates not in isolation but in relational belonging, transforming individual experience into a shared theological consciousness.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

The findings illuminate the multifaceted nature of faith transformation as experienced by individuals undergoing religious conversion. Rather than depicting conversion as a sudden doctrinal

shift or a social realignment, the study conceptualizes it as an ongoing interpretive dialogue between self, divine, and community (Şahin et al., 2025). The experiential narratives demonstrate that conversion involves a profound reconfiguration of meaning, in which participants reinterpret the symbols and language of faith through renewed consciousness.

By emphasizing hermeneutic reflection as the essence of conversion, this study contributes a distinctive perspective to the field of comparative theology and phenomenological inquiry (Menon, 2024). It situates religious transformation within the realm of lived theology—an experiential dimension where doctrine becomes embodied in personal encounters and existential awareness (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025). The results thus offer a phenomenological response to the question of how faith is experienced, redefined, and integrated into everyday life, underscoring the spiritual continuity rather than rupture in the process of belief transformation.

### **Relation to Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks**

The present findings both support and extend earlier interpretations of religious conversion proposed by (Cruz et al., 2023; Kenny & Farr, 2024), who viewed conversion as a multidimensional process involving psychological, social, and spiritual domains. However, while these scholars focused primarily on structural and behavioral dynamics, the current study advances the understanding by revealing the lived hermeneutic dimension—how faith is continuously interpreted through experience. This (Elazar & Billig, 2025) argument that conversion encompasses gendered and existential layers of meaning, though the present analysis expands this view by integrating theological reflection as a conscious interpretive act.

Furthermore, the results resonate with (Nasreldein et al., 2025) exploration of identity reconstruction in interreligious contexts but move beyond its sociological framing to emphasize the phenomenological depth of self-transformation. The participants' narratives corroborate (Lacopo, 2024) notion of inner faith dynamics, yet they deepen the analysis by uncovering how divine presence is embodied in ordinary experiences, transforming the mundane into the sacred (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Together, these connections reinforce the value of a phenomenological approach in uncovering the essence of spiritual experience—the ongoing interplay between meaning, embodiment, and divine encounter that transcends categorical definitions of religion or doctrine.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The implications of this study extend beyond individual narratives of conversion to broader cultural and theological contexts. The phenomenological insight that faith transformation is both interpretive and relational underscores the importance of viewing religious identity as fluid and dialogical rather than fixed or absolute. In pluralistic societies, this understanding has profound implications for interfaith dialogue, pastoral practice, and theological education. It encourages religious institutions to acknowledge the existential and experiential dimensions of belief formation, fostering empathy and openness toward diverse spiritual journeys (Mallampalli, 2025). From a scholarly perspective, the findings reaffirm the necessity of integrating lived experience into comparative theology, bridging the gap between doctrinal theology and spiritual phenomenology.

Thematically, the research highlights that spiritual authenticity arises not from conformity but from reflective engagement with one's faith tradition (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). This has practical implications for counseling, spiritual direction, and interreligious programs that aim to support individuals navigating transitions in belief (Rigoli, 2023). By situating conversion within a phenomenological framework, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of religious experience as a human endeavor grounded in meaning-making, existential reflection, and embodied spirituality.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While this study offers significant interpretive insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, as with most phenomenological research, the findings are based on a small, purposively selected group of participants, which limits generalizability (Lockhart et al., 2023). The goal of phenomenology is not statistical representativeness but depth of understanding; nonetheless, contextual factors—such as participants' cultural and theological backgrounds—may shape how

experiences are expressed and interpreted (Mukhlis et al., 2024). Second, the interpretative nature of hermeneutic phenomenology introduces a degree of subjectivity, as meaning construction inherently involves the researcher's reflective engagement. Although strategies such as member checking and audit trails were employed to ensure credibility, complete neutrality in interpretation is neither possible nor desirable within this paradigm. Finally, the focus on verbal narratives excludes other potential expressions of spiritual transformation, such as ritual practices or embodied gestures, which may offer additional insights.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

Future studies may extend these findings by examining how theological identity reconstruction unfolds across different cultural or generational contexts (Qiu, 2024). Comparative phenomenological research involving participants from various religious traditions could illuminate cross-cultural variations in the experience of divine encounter and faith reinterpretation. Additionally, longitudinal phenomenological inquiry could explore how the meanings of conversion evolve over time, providing insight into the enduring nature of spiritual transformation (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). Methodologically, integrating phenomenology with narrative theology or contemplative inquiry could further enrich understanding of how individuals articulate and live their evolving faith (Drees, 2024). In doing so, future research may continue to build on the central insight of this study—that religious conversion is an interpretive journey of becoming, rooted in the lived encounter between human consciousness and the transcendent.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the lived experience of religious conversion and the reconstruction of theological identity through a hermeneutic phenomenological lens. The findings revealed that conversion is not merely a doctrinal or institutional change but an interpretive and relational process through which individuals experience an inner awakening and rediscover divine intimacy. By uncovering the essence of faith transformation as an existential dialogue between self, divine, and community, the research addressed the lack of phenomenological depth found in prior sociological and psychological studies. The study contributed a nuanced understanding of lived theology, highlighting how spiritual meaning is formed through reflection, interpretation, and embodiment in daily life. These insights expand current theoretical and practical perspectives on religious experience and interfaith dialogue, offering new pathways for comparative theological discourse.

Looking forward, this study underscores the need to move beyond descriptive accounts of conversion toward integrative models that bridge phenomenology, theology, and interreligious praxis. Future research should examine how lived theological identity continues to evolve across time, culture, and generational contexts, using longitudinal and cross-cultural designs to capture the fluidity of faith transformation. Moreover, scholars and practitioners in pastoral care, interfaith education, and religious leadership can apply these findings to develop dialogical frameworks that foster empathy, mutual understanding, and spiritual resilience within pluralistic societies. In doing so, phenomenological theology may not only interpret conversion but actively contribute to the cultivation of inclusive and transformative religious communities.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All stages of the research—including conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation—were conducted independently and ethically. The funding sponsor had no involvement in the design, interpretation, or presentation of the study's results.

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