



Exploring Spiritual Transformation and Identity Reconstruction Among Religious Converts in the Indonesian Cultural Context

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ABSTRACT

Religious conversion is a complex phenomenon that intersects with personal, cultural, and spiritual dimensions, often leading to profound identity transformations. While previous studies have addressed sociological and institutional aspects of conversion, little is known about how individuals experience and interpret the process from within. This study addresses the gap by asking: How do religious converts make sense of their spiritual transformation and identity reconstruction during conversion? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study explores the lived experiences of ten individuals who voluntarily converted to a new religion within the past five years. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted over a three-month period, with participants recruited through community-based religious study groups and interfaith discussion forums. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically to uncover the essence of their experiences. Four main themes emerged: inner turmoil and search for truth, moments of spiritual awakening, negotiation of identity and belonging, and the establishment of a new religious self. These findings illustrate that conversion is not merely a doctrinal shift but an existential reorientation grounded in personal meaning-making. The study enhances our understanding of conversion as a deeply human process shaped by internal and social narratives. Its implications extend to religious studies, spiritual care, and identity research, offering a richer framework for future investigations into personal religious transformation.



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INTRODUCTION

Religious conversion is a deeply personal and transformative phenomenon that intersects with cultural, spiritual, and existential dimensions of human life. Across diverse societies, individuals make profound changes in their religious affiliations, often as a result of inner questioning, life crises, or spiritual awakening. These transitions are not merely shifts in belief systems or ritual practices; they signify a reorientation of the self, values, and worldview. In contemporary pluralistic societies, where religious identities are frequently contested and negotiated, the phenomenon of conversion has become increasingly visible and complex.

The significance of this experience lies not only in its theological implications but also in its impact on personal identity, social belonging, and existential meaning (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). Converts often navigate intricate social dynamics, including acceptance or rejection by family, community, or their former religious groups. At the same time, they undergo an inward transformation that reshapes how they understand themselves and relate to the divine. As such, religious conversion encapsulates both an outward socio-cultural shift and an inward spiritual journey that is unique, multifaceted, and deeply subjective.

Despite its complexity, much of the scholarly discourse on religious conversion has focused on external factors such as social influence, doctrinal appeal, or political context. While these aspects are valuable, they often overlook the lived, embodied experiences of individuals undergoing such transitions. In recent decades, however, scholars from diverse regions—including Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America—have emphasized the importance of interiority, narrative, and personal meaning in understanding conversion (e.g., Hefner, 2020; Oosterbaan, 2017; Ukah, 2021). The personal meanings, emotional processes, and spiritual realizations that accompany conversion remain underexplored, particularly from the perspective of those who live through it.

This gap underscores the need for a phenomenological inquiry one that centers on the subjective experience and seeks to uncover the essence of conversion as it is lived and interpreted by the individuals themselves. Phenomenology, as a philosophical and methodological approach, provides the tools to access this layer of meaning, moving beyond observable behavior to the inner world of human consciousness and spiritual transformation.

Within the broader discourse on religious transformation, scholarly attention has increasingly turned toward understanding the lived experiences of individuals who undergo significant shifts in faith and belief. Studies exploring the subjective dimension of religious conversion have highlighted the psychological, emotional, and spiritual challenges faced by converts, especially in pluralistic and multicultural contexts (Zebiri, 2008; Van Nieuwkerk, 2014). Such investigations affirm that the meaning of conversion cannot be fully grasped through doctrinal or sociological analysis alone, rather, it must be approached through the lens of personal experience and inner transformation.

However, exploring these subjective dimensions poses notable methodological challenges. Traditional quantitative methods, while valuable for identifying general trends or demographic patterns, often fail to capture the depth, nuance, and existential weight of the conversion experience. These approaches tend to reduce complex internal phenomena into measurable variables, leaving out the rich textures of meaning that are central to the spiritual journey of converts. As Köse (1996) and Roald (2001) have noted, many existing frameworks rely on external motivations or contextual explanations, often neglecting how individuals interpret, narrate, and integrate their experiences into a coherent spiritual identity.

These limitations have hindered the development of a comprehensive understanding of religious conversion as it is subjectively lived. Without approaches that prioritize first-person perspectives and the interpretative structures through which individuals make sense of their transformation, essential aspects of the phenomenon remain obscured. Therefore, qualitative methodologies particularly those grounded in phenomenology have emerged as critical tools for addressing these gaps, offering a pathway to uncover the essence of lived religious experiences beyond what surface-level descriptions can convey.

Prevailing approaches to understanding religious conversion have often relied on practical frameworks emphasizing external motivators, such as social integration, marriage, political identity, or theological persuasion (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). While these perspectives offer valuable insights into the observable dimensions of conversion, they are typically anchored in sociological or behavioral paradigms that prioritize institutional or communal factors over individual meaning-making. Consequently, they fall short in capturing the interior, affective, and existential experiences that often define the spiritual transformation process.

Such frameworks tend to overlook the personal struggle, emotional ambiguity, and spiritual reorientation that many converts experience. The reliance on quantitative instruments or structured typologies, while methodologically rigorous, reduces the complexity of conversion into static categories and fails to honor the evolving, fluid, and deeply subjective nature of the phenomenon. For example, the experience of inner conflict preceding conversion or the gradual embodiment of a new religious identity is rarely illuminated in studies that privilege external variables (Van Nieuwkerk, 2014; Köse, 1996).

This gap in understanding points to the necessity of a methodological shift one that centers on how individuals themselves perceive, interpret, and narrate their journeys of faith. Phenomenological inquiry, especially in its interpretative form, offers a powerful alternative by privileging the voice of the subject and delving into the meaning structures that underlie their lived experiences. Rather than measuring conversion, this approach seeks to understand what it feels like to convert to inhabit a liminal space between belief systems, to reconstruct one's sense of belonging, and to redefine one's relationship with the sacred. Thus, a phenomenological exploration can provide a richer, more holistic account of religious conversion, addressing the dimensions that remain hidden in conventional paradigms.

Recent studies have explored the experiences of religious converts in various social and cultural contexts, highlighting the complexity of spiritual transformation. Scholars such as Köse (1996), Zebiri (2008), and Van Nieuwkerk (2014) have examined themes like motivation, identity negotiation, and community integration. However, these works often emphasize sociological or demographic factors, leaving the inner, lived experiences of converts underexplored. Phenomenological perspectives remain limited in the literature, especially regarding how converts make sense of their transformation. This study builds on existing insights while addressing the deeper dimensions of personal meaning and existential change.

To explore the essence of religious conversion from a first-person perspective, this research adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach. This method enables a focused investigation into how individuals experience and assign meaning to their spiritual journeys. It is particularly suited to address the limitations previously noted, as it centers on subjective experience rather than external variables. The study aims to illuminate how converts understand their identity, belonging, and relationship with the sacred through their own words. This approach offers a holistic and context-sensitive response to the knowledge gap outlined above.

The article is structured as follows. It begins with an introduction that presents the general and specific background of the study, along with the theoretical rationale. The next section describes the phenomenological methodology, including participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). The Results section presents the main experiential themes supported by participants' quotations. The Discussion interprets these findings in light of existing literature, while the Conclusion summarizes key insights and outlines implications for future research. Each section contributes to a deeper understanding of the lived experience of religious conversion.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of religious converts in their process of spiritual transformation (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). Phenomenology, as a qualitative research design, focuses on uncovering the essence of subjective experiences and allows for an in-depth understanding of how individuals interpret and assign meaning to significant phenomena in their lives. The interpretative (hermeneutic) variant of phenomenology, informed by Heideggerian philosophy, was applied to emphasize the contextual and existential dimensions of participants' narratives. This approach was deemed appropriate for addressing the research question, which seeks to understand the nuanced and complex experiences of individuals undergoing religious conversion, particularly in terms of identity, spirituality, and personal meaning-making. In line with interpretative phenomenology, the researchers adopted a reflexive stance throughout the study, continuously examining how their assumptions, prior knowledge of religious issues, and interpretative lenses could influence the co-construction of meaning with participants. Reflexive notes and analytic memos were maintained from the outset of the study to document these reflections and make the interpretative process more transparent.

Participants

Participants consisted of individuals who had converted to a new religion within the past five years and were actively practicing their adopted faith (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Purposive sampling was used to ensure the inclusion of individuals who possessed rich, firsthand experience relevant to the phenomenon under study. Inclusion criteria required participants to be over the age of 18, to have undergone a personal process of religious conversion, and to be willing and able to articulate their experiences in depth. Individuals were excluded if they had converted under coercion or had not yet integrated into a religious community post-conversion. The sample comprised 10 participants, including 6 females and 4 males, ranging in age from 24 to 51 years, with an average age of 36. All participants had voluntarily undergone conversion and represented diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, enhancing the richness and contextual variety of the data.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews using an open-ended interview guide tailored to explore themes of spiritual change, identity negotiation, and existential meaning (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Interviews were conducted in quiet, private settings to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality. Each session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Interview protocols were developed based on existing literature and adapted to encourage reflective responses, while maintaining flexibility to follow the unique flow of each conversation. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual and non-verbal cues. All interviews were transcribed verbatim prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework, following a systematic multi-stage process (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). Transcripts were first read multiple times to ensure immersion in the data. Meaningful statements were identified and grouped into emergent codes, which were then clustered into higher-order themes based on conceptual similarities. These themes were refined through iterative comparison across transcripts, allowing for the identification of shared experiential patterns and unique individual variations. NVivo 14 software was utilized to support data organization and coding but did not determine the analytical framework. The analysis remained grounded in the participants' narratives and emphasized both descriptive and interpretive dimensions to uncover the essential meanings embedded in their experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the appropriate institutional ethics review board prior to data collection (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). Written informed consent was provided by all participants after being fully informed about the purpose of the study, procedures, and their rights to withdraw at any point without consequence. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained by using pseudonyms and securely storing all digital and written data. The research adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with national ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

RESULTS

This section presents the lived experiences of participants who have undergone a spiritual transformation through conversion to a new faith. The analysis yielded four major themes that reflect the essence of their journey: Inner Turmoil and Search for Truth, Moments of Spiritual Awakening, Negotiating Identity and Belonging, and Establishing a New Religious Self. These themes were identified through interpretative phenomenological analysis and hermeneutic reflection, rooted in participants' narratives. Verbatim quotations are included to preserve the authenticity of each voice and to ground interpretations in the participants' own expressions. Beyond the descriptive accounts, this section presents an integrated interpretation that reveals how these themes collectively form a coherent trajectory of existential rupture, awakening, and reconstruction of selfhood.

Inner Turmoil and Search for Truth

The participants' narratives consistently began with a profound inner struggle characterized by feelings of existential dissonance and spiritual dissatisfaction. Many described a long-standing sense of "emptiness" or "disconnection" with the faith into which they were born, prompting a restless search for meaning.

"I always felt like something was missing... I would go through the motions, the rituals, but I couldn't feel the presence. It was like I was pretending to be someone I wasn't." (Participant 3)

This state of internal conflict led some to question fundamental beliefs and to explore religious traditions outside their inherited worldview. The search was often self-initiated and deeply introspective, involving personal reflection, reading sacred texts, and silent contemplation.

"I didn't convert because someone told me to. I read, I prayed, and I cried a lot. It was a journey inward more than anything else." (Participant 7)

Moments of Spiritual Awakening

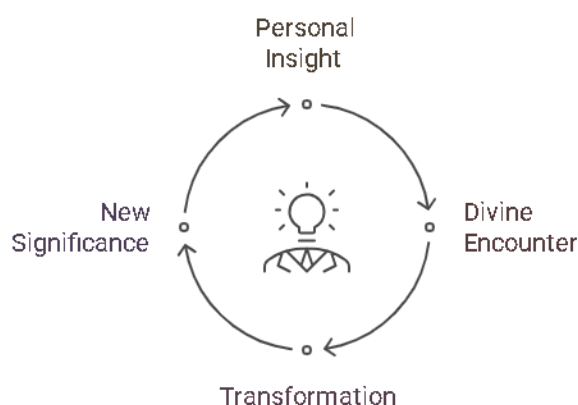
A pivotal element of each participant's narrative was a moment of intense personal insight or spiritual realization, often described as a "turning point." These moments were marked by an overwhelming sense of clarity, peace, or divine encounter, which they perceived as affirmation of the new faith.

"It was during a quiet prayer. No one was there, but I felt seen really seen for the first time. That's when I knew I had to change everything." (Participant 1)

These awakenings were not always dramatic but consistently reported as transformative. They represented a profound reorientation of the self and the world, imbuing daily experiences with new spiritual significance.

"The call to prayer wasn't just a sound anymore. It became a call to life, to presence." (Participant 6)

Cycle of Spiritual Awakening



Negotiating Identity and Belonging

After conversion, participants faced complex social negotiations related to identity and community. Many experienced a dual sense of liberation and marginalization: liberation from former religious constraints and marginalization from family or social circles.

"I lost friends, I lost family. But I gained something deeper peace, purpose, connection to something eternal." (Participant 2)

Participants described efforts to maintain familial relationships while also asserting their new religious identity. The feeling of "being in-between" not fully accepted by either their former or new community was a recurring motif.

“Sometimes I felt like I was not ‘enough’ for either side. Too Muslim for my old friends, too new for my new community.” (Participant 8)

Establishing a New Religious Self

The process of integrating into a new faith was not merely about adopting rituals or beliefs, but about embodying a new spiritual identity. Participants emphasized the importance of daily practices, mentorship, and internalizing values as part of their transformation.

“Converting wasn’t the end. It was the beginning of learning, practicing, failing, and growing in faith.” (Participant 5)

Many found meaning through religious community engagement, learning religious texts in the new language, and actively participating in religious events. This phase was marked by a growing sense of authenticity and spiritual fulfillment.

“For the first time, my faith feels like mine not something I inherited, but something I chose and built.” (Participant 4)

The narratives reveal a multidimensional journey of conversion characterized by internal conflict, spiritual clarity, social reorientation, and gradual embodiment of a new faith identity. While each path is unique, the participants collectively illuminate the deep psychological and existential dimensions of religious transformation, grounded in personal agency, meaning-making, and the pursuit of spiritual truth.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that religious conversion is experienced as a profound inner transformation marked by spiritual longing, moments of awakening, identity negotiation, and the construction of a new religious self. These experiences directly respond to the central research question regarding how converts perceive and give meaning to their spiritual and existential journeys during the process of conversion. Unlike some conversion models that emphasize linear processes of belief change, this study demonstrates that conversion is characterized by fluctuating emotional intensities, unresolved tensions, and ongoing interpretative struggles that complicate the notion of a stable or completed transformation.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the conversion phenomenon by foregrounding the personal and subjective dimensions often overlooked in prior research. The narratives collected highlight that conversion is not simply a decision or a rational shift in belief systems; rather, it involves a complex restructuring of self, values, and spiritual awareness. The emotional turmoil, the clarity found in awakening moments, and the ongoing negotiation of identity illustrate that conversion is both a discontinuity and a renewal of existential meaning. These insights provide a richer, more layered understanding of conversion that extends beyond institutional frameworks or sociological typologies.

When compared with prior studies, the current findings align with and extend the literature in meaningful ways. For instance, Köse (1996) emphasized the role of personal motivation in conversion but did not delve into the deep inner conflict or spiritual void that preceded it. Similarly, Zebiri (2008) discussed identity struggles among converts but lacked the interpretative depth provided by a phenomenological lens. The present study, grounded in interpretative phenomenological analysis, affirms and complements these earlier findings by providing firsthand accounts that articulate how meaning is made during transformation. Furthermore, the results resonate with Heideggerian philosophy, which emphasizes the being-in-the-world and the process of becoming through interpretation, thus validating the methodological and theoretical grounding of the study.

Implications of the Findings

The insights gained from this study hold both theoretical and practical relevance for scholars, spiritual leaders, and community organizations engaging with religious converts (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). From a sociocultural perspective, the findings

underscore the need for greater sensitivity to the internal struggles and meaning-making processes that accompany religious conversion. This understanding challenges simplified narratives that portray conversion as a purely social or doctrinal shift. For professionals working with converts whether in counseling, religious education, or interfaith dialogue recognizing the emotional, existential, and identity-related dimensions of this journey can foster more compassionate and contextually aware support systems. Additionally, the findings invite broader reflections on how personal transformation occurs in contemporary religious landscapes, where identity is increasingly fluid and negotiated across multiple social spheres.

Limitations of the Study

While the interpretative phenomenological approach provides rich and nuanced insights, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size, though appropriate for phenomenological research, limits the generalizability of the findings beyond the specific individuals and contexts studied. All participants had voluntarily converted within the last five years, and their experiences may not represent those of individuals who converted under different circumstances or in other cultural settings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces subjectivity, which, while central to phenomenology, may be influenced by memory, personal bias, or the desire to present a coherent life story. These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but instead highlight the need for cautious interpretation and contextual application.

Future Research Directions

The findings of this study open several pathways for future exploration. Further research could examine the long-term spiritual trajectories of converts, including how their sense of belonging and identity evolve over time within their new faith communities (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Comparative studies across different religious traditions or cultural contexts could also deepen understanding of the universal and particular dimensions of conversion. Moreover, integrating phenomenological methods with complementary qualitative approaches such as narrative analysis or ethnography may offer richer perspectives on the communal, ritualistic, and theological dynamics of religious transformation. Ultimately, continuing to center the lived experience in research will contribute to a more holistic and humanistic understanding of spiritual change in an increasingly diverse world.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of individuals who converted to a new religion, focusing on how they make sense of their spiritual transformation and identity reconstruction. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, the research uncovered four key themes: inner turmoil, spiritual awakening, identity negotiation, and the formation of a new religious self. These findings reveal that conversion is not merely a shift in belief, but a profound existential reorientation shaped by personal meaning-making. The study offers a deeper understanding of conversion beyond sociological models, addressing the gap in literature that often overlooks the internal, subjective dimensions of the phenomenon. By highlighting the voices of converts, this research contributes to more human-centered perspectives in religious studies and spiritual care. Theoretically, this study advances current knowledge by demonstrating that religious conversion is a dynamic interpretative process, not a linear transition, thereby reinforcing the need for meaning-centered models in contemporary conversion theory. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for spiritual caregivers, counselors, and religious institutions in supporting converts as they navigate psychological tensions and identity reconstruction. Future studies may expand on these insights by exploring diverse conversion contexts and integrating longitudinal designs to examine how spiritual identities evolve over time.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the publication of this article. All funding sources and institutional affiliations have been disclosed in the Acknowledgement section. The research was conducted independently and without any commercial, financial, or personal relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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