Religious Conversion and New Social Identity

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Abstract: This study is aimed to explain the search for a new identity through religious conversion. Religious conversion is a process of transformation within an individual characterized by a radical change in religion. This radical change takes the form of a conversion from the old religion to a new religion or a change from a religious way that is lived full of darkness to a more enlightened religious way. Religious conversion requires individuals to find a new identity. Religious conversion requires the individual to find a new identity. The new identity formation is easier and more effective when the reason for religious conversion is intrinsic, not extrinsic.

Keywords: new identity, religious conversion, religious orientation

1. Introduction: Social Identity as a Natural Process

Every individual is part of a group. The group can include race, ethnicity, religion, nation-state, political party, professional activity, gender, education level, and so on. There are undoubtedly particular characteristics that define a group. Individuals who are in a group usually realize the characteristics that their group possesses.

Social identity is an individual's self-awareness that they are part of a group that has certain characteristics. For instance, an individual whose father and mother are Sundanese thinks of himself or herself as a Sundanese with some characteristics, such as polite, humorous, and

friendly.[1] An individual who identifies himself or herself as an Indonesian will immediately stand up and get involved when the Indonesia Raya song being sung.

The process of social identity formation occurs through a series of processes as illustrated by Putra and Pitaloka (2012). They stated that humans, as creatures who seek to understand themselves and their surroundings, will try to find out sources of knowledge that provide clarification on their desires. Since humans are tied to their current life situations, they look for answers about themselves based on the closest sources, such as parents, family, and other close relatives. Parents and family are the ones who will introduce their children to the group identity (religion, ethnicity, nation-state, etc). They will also impart information regarding the characteristics and traits of the social group to whom they are part of. They also discuss how their group differs from other groups. In addition, they also point out the positive and important characteristics of the group. The information then would be examined, digested, and believed.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Identity

Social identity theory pioneered by Henri Tajfel believes that every individual aspires to feel valuable. The desire for this is fulfilled by demonstrating personal achievement or joining an organization of which one appears proud (Suryanto et al, 2023). Feelings of group pride are generally achieved when individuals are part of the group. Thus, ingroup favoritism—the belief that one's own group is always positive— as the result of group affiliation. On the other hand, there is an opposing phenomenon known as outgroup derogation, which is to despise anything related to other groups (Rahman, 2020).

With social identity theory as explained by Tajfel above, individuals who are in a group have a tendency to have an appreciation or pride in the characteristics of their group. Adherents of Sunni Islam, a major branch of Islam committed to actualizing the Prophet's sunnah in public life (Idris, 1980), live under the auspices of fiqh. The Sunnis, who have a number of schools of thought within Islamic jurisprudence (Hanafi, Shafii, Hanbali, Maliki), genuinely take pride in the richness of perspectives on fiqh matters. Adherents of Shia Islam, a major branch of Islam that deeply loves Ali bin Abi Talib and the descendants of the Prophet (*ahlul bait*) (Idris, 1980), who have a tradition of crying and wailing by beating their left chest, authentically have pride in the characteristics of their group, especially since Ali bin Abi Talib is known as a very intelligent person with extraordinary depth of knowledge. Adherents of Christianity display pride in their faith with crosses adorning their home, churches, and possibly his chest.

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[1]The findings of Suwarsih Warnaen's (University of Indonesia) cross-cultural psychology research on the perceptions of various ethnic groups in Indonesia towards their own and other ethnic groups. Warnaen observed that both Sundanese and other ethnic groups regard Sundanese ethnicity as polite, humorous, and friendly. See Idhamsyah Eka Putra and Ardiningtyas Piataloka, Psychology of Prejudice, Ghalia Indonesia, Jakarta, 2012, p. 89.

In actuality, there are varying perspectives of individuals in the group. The majority of group members think in an orderly manner that aligns with the group's way of thinking. However, there are always individuals who have a distinctive or unique way of thinking, who have different attitudes and behaviors from the group's tendencies. They grow up and develop distinct perspectives or beliefs. In fact, they may no longer have pride in their own group. The phenomenon is even contrary to what Rahman (2020) mentioned about in-group favoritism. They experience what is known as outgroup favoritism, which is the view that other groups are always positive. The opposite phenomenon is called ingroup derogation, which is resenting anything associated with one's own group.

2.2. Religious Conversation

Experience, is a religious development characterized by profound shifts, both with regard to ideology and religious behavior. From a linguistic perspective, the word "conversion" originates from the Latin "conversio," which signifies moving, changing, and repentance. In English, the term "religious conversion" refers to a shift from a state or from one religion to another. It is a term generally given to the process that leads to the acceptance of a religious attitude, which can take place gradually or suddenly (Jalaluddin, 2020). Meanwhile, Daradjat (2005) argues that conversion refers to the "opposite direction", meaning that religious conversion can be interpreted as the occurrence of a shift in belief that is opposite to the prior (religious) belief.

A number of terms, such as alternation, reversion, and religious transformation, have a high degree of overlap with religious conversion. Alternation is the term used by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Alternation is identified not only by behavioral changes but more importantly by shifts in worldview that affect both the individual and the environment. Meanwhile, reversion is widely used to describe someone who returns to *fitrah* (natural inclination/original disposition/innate nature of human beings). This term is closest to the concept of *muallaf*. This paper refers to the term and understanding of religious conversion. Subandi refers to it as a religious transformation, which implies the process of changing one's religious orientation from a general religious orientation to a mystical religious life as a result of implementing a worship activity (Subandi, 2009).

Religious conversion is identifiable by several characteristics (Subandi, 2009). Firstly, shifts in religious affiliation in which an individual moves from one religion to another. It also includes conversion from one branch of religion to another in the same religious group, for example from Sunni Islam to Shia Islam or from Pentecostal Christianity to Javanese Christianity. Secondly, an increase in religious appreciation, from a lack of interest in religion to a strong religious conviction. Umar bin Khattab is an example of a pagan with a violent temperament who later turned into a true lover of Islam. Thirdly, changes and improvements in religious commitments within the context of the same religion.

3. Method

In this study, the literature study method was used. In this method, literature search is carried out by reading various books, journals, proceedings, and other sources of knowledge related to the research topic. Literature studies are conducted by exploring studies that have been done on a related topic (Zed, 2008).

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Psychological Factors and Religious Conversation

Psychologists indicate that psychological factors play a role in religious conversion. For example, experiencing inner pressure might encourage someone to explore and figure out how to attain inner peace. The condition of an empty or helpless soul encourages one to seek the protection of greater powers capable of providing a calm and peaceful life. Thus, the occurrence of conversion is influenced by both external and internal factors (Sururin, 2004). Some of the factors that influence religious conversion are presented below. First is personality. Psychologically, a certain type of personality will affect a person's soul life. The personality will guide an individual in behavior and activities. A positive personality will lead someone to always strive to do what's right, and vice versa. James' study showed that melancholic personalities are more susceptible to conversion because of their greater emotional vulnerability. Second is disposition. Every individual has a unique disposition, and it also has a significant impact on one's religious conversion. Research by Guy E. Swanson suggests that birth order influences religious conversion. Firstborns and youngest children usually are not confronted with inner pressure. Meanwhile, children born in the middle order or between the firstborn and the youngest often experience it. Another crucial factor is the model of education and upbringing. The use of rewards and punishments, as well as storytelling methods, have proven effective in helping religious conversion occur (Kusumaputri, 2007).

Researchers in the psychology of religion, one of whom is Zakiah Darajat, describe that religious conversion undergoes several stages of change. The first is the a priori period, which is an a priori attitude towards the prior religion. The second is the period of uneasiness, which is the inner turmoil that encourages them to look for a source of teaching that helps them resolve conflict. The third is the period of conversion, which is when the internal conflict reduces and shifts towards stability in a new belief. The fourth is the period of calm and serenity, which is satisfaction with the decisions that have been made and experiencing a stable inner atmosphere for the new concept of life. The fifth is the period of expression of conversion, which is an expression of acceptance and submission to the value system or beliefs chosen in everyday life (Pihasniwati, 2007).

Research on religious conversion has been conducted both in Indonesia and several other countries. Turner's (1979) research reviewed religious conversion in a Mexican Indian community. Turner's research suggested that the conversion occurred due to missionary activities from Christians. In addition, Paloutzian et al (1999) showed how personality changes (psychology) of people who convert. A study involving large subjects in 58 countries

conducted by Barro and McCleary (2024) showed religious conversion "depends positively on measures of religious pluralism, negatively on official restrictions that inhibit conversion, negatively on a history of Communism, negatively on real per capita GDP, and positively on years of schooling".

There have also been studies on religious conversion in Indonesia including research conducted by Indiarti who explores the process of psychological change in students who convert to Islam. Additionally, Kusuma and Zulaifah's (2001) research examines the decision-making process involved in conversion. Firmanto (2012) observed the causes and social impacts of religious conversion in Bukitsari, Bali. Solin (2023) in Medan showed various interpersonal problems after conversion, including not being allowed by parents to return home unless they remove the headscarf, relationships becoming tenuous, being slandered, being considered brainwashed by ISIS, and even physically tortured.

The phenomenon of religious conversion is exceedingly prevalent. In the United States of America, after the 11 September 2001 tragedy, there were many religious conversions from Christianity to Islam. The number of new Muslims in America has never grown as dramatically as during that period. Religious conversion in the United Kingdom is also remarkable, with a number of important aristocrats of the British Empire converting from the Anglican religion to Islam. Papua Province is a predominantly non-Muslim region of Indonesia, where Muslims make up only about 15 percent. However, specifically in Merauke Regency, Muslims are the most numerous compared to other religions. Badan Pusat Statistik Papua (2020) shows that there are 131,162 Muslims, 103,135 Catholics, 45,731 Protestants, 459 Hindus, and 223 Buddhists.

Their lives unavoidably change as a consequence of their religious conversions. Their lives undergo significant changes in a number of areas because of their new religious affiliation. For example, a person who was previously a Christian converted to Islam. They now realize that they are now part of the majority group in Indonesia. They are more likely to be accepted by a greater number of individuals.

One important question is: Does a person who changes religions also convert to that religion?

4.2. Religious Motivation and Social Identity

Gordon W. Allport's (1950) analysis can be utilized to apply the theory of intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation. A person with an extrinsic orientation will regard religion as helpful for a variety of purposes, such as finding solace, security, or self-justification. Their beliefs are typically adopted selectively to satisfy their primary needs. They find that religion helps validate a way of life, enhance status, challenge reality, and elevate self-confidence. To put it briefly, they convert from one religion to another after accepting it in order to use it for their personal benefit.

Meanwhile, intrinsically oriented individuals show motivation for life in their religion. After embracing a religion, they internalize its teachings and (strive to) follow its teachings fully. They try to maintain their faith by bringing religious practices to life in their lives.

Praying, and practicing the worship of God, they do so with the realization that this is the way to maintain their faith and religiosity. Other needs, no matter how strong, are considered less important and are integrated as much as possible in harmony with religious beliefs and teachings.

4.3. Religious Conversation and Religious Motivation

Social identity based on religion is more adaptable than those based on blood or ethnicity, which are set in stone and cannot be changed by the individuals involved. This shift in social identity has been present since antiquity, as evidenced by the spread of Islam by the Prophet Muhammad. A large number of sun and idol worshippers, such as Salman al-Farisi, Abu Sufyan, Khalid bin Walid, and others, converted to Islam. Conversions to Muslims continue to take place involving Indonesian well-known figures today such as Syafii Antonio, Tamara Bleszynski, Dian Sastrowardoyo, Irene Handono, and others who keep going to converting to Islam. The change in religious identity that they chose led them to have a new group and therefore required them to define their new social identity.

According to Gordon W. Allport, an individual who is genuinely undergoing a religious conversion will aspire to be intrinsic in their religious beliefs. They will seek to align all their needs, ways of life, and patterns of behaviour with the basis of religion. Umar bin Khattab is the best example. Muhammad Syafii Antonio, a leading Islamic banking expert, is an illustration of a person who makes an effort to follow religious guidelines. This kind of intrinsic personality actually finds it easier to adjust their identity. Their entire way of thinking and behavior has been changed to conform to their religious beliefs.

However, if an individual converts and does not show any intention to follow the teachings of the religion, then they are not actually undergoing a religious conversion. For them, religion serves to guarantee an uncomplicated marriage or keeps him in demand as a public figure because the majority of people who share his new religion also support it. Their religious motivation is heavily impacted by external considerations. Religion functions as a utility.

5. Conclusions

Religious transformation in the form of religious conversion leads humans to acquire a new social identity. Religious conversion itself means a process of transformation within the individual characterized by radical changes in religion. This radical change takes the form of moving from an old religion to a new religion or changing from an old way of religion filled with 'darkness' to a more enlightened way of religion. This religious conversion makes individuals have to find their new identity. The formation of this new identity is easier when the reason for religious conversion is intrinsic, not extrinsic.

Wallahu a'lam bi ash-shawab.

Acknowledgments

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