

Conference Paper

The Meaning of Experiences of Religious Conversion Process

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Abstract

This research is aimed to reveal people's religious conversion experiences and the meaning of those experiences for people who decided to change their religion. This research used qualitative approach interpretive phenomenological analysis. There are two research questions to be solved in this research: (i) how experience of people decides to change their religion; (ii) what the meanings lead them to change their religion. Participants were two people who had experienced religious conversion in the recent two years. Data were collected by conducting a semi-structured interview. In order to validate the data, communicative validity and argumentative validity method were used in this research. The meanings which lead people to change their religion were gained from the participants' religious conversion experiences, and can be interpreted as (i) the soul's call to achieve convenience and peace; (ii) the choices in life to achieve convenience, though it contains some risks; (iii) to release the burden of life.

Keywords: Conversion, Experience, Meaning, Process, Religious.

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Received: 2 April 2018

Accepted: 17 April 2018

Published: 23 May 2018

Publishing services provided by
Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the 1st ICSEAS 2016 Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

Conversion to another religion is a dramatic experience that can change one understands qualitatively and requires a reforming of new belief as well as new commitment [1]. The changes in understanding and reforming of new belief mean the individual needs to do a self-readjustment that ended up creating an inner turmoil. The inner turmoil usually comes from the conflict in family, environment, socio-culture, and the religion itself. These conflicts create many problems for the individual that convert to another religion.

Religion conversion creates a fractured family, social punishment, and disunity that can affect individual [2]. Then, a fractured family was created by a conflict between members of the family because they feel that they failed to educate the individual that

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convert to another religion. These problems, in the end, made the converted person sad and at fault because he/she thinks that he/she have created a problem [3].

Besides rejection, inner turmoil that felt by the individual was also reinforced by reluctance and anxiety. These feelings arise from the value taught in the previous religion that a person that converts to another religion will be sin greatly and will receive a punishment in the afterlife.

These external factors, in the end, will likely to create psychological effects for the person that converts to another religion. Psychological effects are developed because the person is trying to readjust himself to the social environment and personal condition within him/her. These adjustment creates anxiety, guilty feeling, rejected, shame, reluctance, and sadness [3]. In some cases, religion conversion creates many psychological challenges such as extreme rigidity in thinking, emotional dependence, and even drug addictions [4]. A heavy burden in life in a person usually leads to depression that can affect the state of emotion, physical condition, and cognition that will disrupt everyday life [3].

The newfound meaning is important for every experiences and event that a person found [5]. Human experience meaning form when they understand themselves and the world, understand their uniqueness in the world and find what they want to achieve in life [6]. A newfound meaning will be followed by positive mental health [6]. In this, transcendence self will be able to handle anxiety and prevent depression.

The previous study tried to see the effect of religion conversion with personality changes [4]. The result shows that by stating a religious conversion, a person creates changes in his/her personality to a more positive one. This study used Big Five Theory as the basic traits in defining personality. An individual who converts to another religion becomes more adaptive and is able to do many religious functions. The weakness of this study is in the bias related to religion basic rules and norms to the individual. Aside from that, this study was done in Slovakia that has different cultural context and religious tradition from Indonesia. Some other studies done in Indonesia tried to delve into the psychological effect, both positive and negative to the converted person as well as the reason he/she convert, but they did not reveal any detail on how such person interprets his/her personal and social life.

This research is qualitative research with interpretative phenomenology analysis method. There are two focuses on this research. First, this study focuses on the experience process of a person who converts to another religion by looking at the relationship

with family and social environment, self-inner turmoil, and also in beliefs and traditions. Second, this research also focuses on the meaning of the person in converting to another religion.

There are some limitations of this study. First, the researcher used only two subjects. This might cause the experiences of the converted subjects relatively the same, and the discovery of the meanings obtained relatively similar. Further research can multiply the number of subjects so that the richness of experience glimpsed would elaborate, and meanings that can be drawn from the experience would also grow. In addition, the two subjects appeared to have harboured the desire to convert for a long time, so the conversion process is not really dramatic.

2. Purpose and Issues

The purpose of this study is to reveal the experience of a person converted to another religion and what is the meaning of the experience to those who converted to another religion. The formulations of issues in this study are how is the experience of a person converting to another religion? And what is the meaning of converting religion experience to the people who did?

3. Theoretical Basis

Changing one's religion can be translated into the phrase religious conversion. Conversion means doing something opposite of one's previous belief [7]. Further, religious conversion is a kind of growth or development in spiritual that in itself contains a change in direction meaningful enough, in one's view of religious teaching and action [7].

Daradjat explains that the process of converting one's religion affect many people differently [7]. Some were shallow, while others are deep and meaningful. The different processes of changing religion from each individual affect each personal experience differently [7]. But, even though those processes were unique, in general Daradjat said there are some steps in religion conversion through these general processes. The first phase is calm phase before conversion, where all attitudes, behaviours and traits are indifferent, or against religion; Second Restlessness phase: conflict and inner turmoil phase. It makes the person anxious, hopeless, tense, panic, etc. These feelings appear because of moral turmoil and disappointment. In this phase, heavy tension, agitation, and spiritual conflict can make a person to be more sensitive, offended,

suggestible and can even end up in despair; and then, conversion event happens as a person reach its agitation and inner turmoil's tipping points. The said person immediately feels like receiving enlightenment from God, and in doing so, resigned to God. The final phase is the Calm and Peaceful moment. A new feeling or spiritual condition emerges; it feels as if every mistake and sin were pardoned. Every disappointment and anxiety slowly goes down.

The expression of conversion in life takes the forms of religious expression in behaviour, rigidity, attitude and words that follow the rules taught by the religion. These reinforce the individual regarding the change in his religion. A religious conversion will create discord in traditions and separation that in the end will affect the individual [2]. In some cases, discord in tradition appears in conflict and rejection either from the religion left behind or the new religion, and it can also manifest into a destructive interreligious conflict. Discord in tradition and separation can also create shame and rejected feeling in one's self.

Responses from extended family and religious environment that previously made the individual convert religion also make him anxious, guilty, shamed, rejected and finally fall into deep sadness [3]. Shame emerges when a person faces with gossips and rejection from the extended family. Then guilt emerges because said person cannot fulfill the family expectations. These attitudes make the person feels rejected from his/her significant others. Thus he/she become anxious because of the insecurity from the surrounding environment. Rejection from parents will also damage the affective relationship in the family and will end up contributing to the appearance of depressive symptoms [8]. Aside from that, expectations from parents and personal experiences of an individual can create a behavioural disorder [9].

The belief from the previous religion that said a person will be a sinner and will receive punishment as well as a certain negative label (apostate or infidel) will create doubts and will develop anxiety in a person [3]. An individual that convert to another religion will have doubts and problems in adapting to the new beliefs. According to Whittaker [10], a problematic self-readjustment can create anxiety and tension in a person, and even inferiority in a person. This can be a source of stress, and trigger a feeling of being abandoned. In many cases, religious conversion creates many psychological challenges such as extreme rigidity in thought, emotional dependency and even drug addictions [4].

A person who was not able to find a way to solve all of his problems creates more problems resulted in the risk of creating neurotically disorder [9]. Many negative feelings, such as guilt, shame and feeling of rejection creates deep sadness in a person. The

sadness felt by the individual as an effect of opposition from many people may create anxiety in individual [3]. Sadness and anxiety tend to make a person feel worthless and hopeless in life [3]. This depressive disorder, according to [3], can manifest into health problems or even suicidal thoughts.

Changing one's religion is a dramatic period that creates a change in understanding, and a creation of new belief and commitment [1]. From this perspective, we can see that religious conversion is a process of changing one's understanding, and it can even be a turning point in one's life. According to Rogers in [11], humans are against new ideas; distort experiences that they found incompatible, see changes as a painful thing and growth as a frightening one. Also according to Rogers, even if those changes will not manifest in an immediate reward, a person will keep doing it in fulfillment of self-restoration or growth [11].

Changes in life toward self-restoration create a turning point in life. A turning point in life can manifest in a revival of spiritual understanding, which is when individual understand that he/she cannot go through life according to the previous way. These usually trigger the search for meaning [12]. Searching for meaning will be very important in life because life without meaning will be harrowing to maintain [12]. Every person wants to be dignified and useful for him, family, work environment, and society surrounding him and valued in the eyes of God [13]. Bastaman also said, as a child, every person tries to fulfill their parents hope and be worthy in the eyes of society [13]. This cannot be fulfilled by someone who converts to another religion, thus creating a mental pressure. Many negative feeling and mental pressure felt by a person that converts to other religion can create depression and hopelessness. By finding meaning, a person can avoid being hopeless, and life will feel useful, valuable and meaningful [13].

4. Research Questions

This research questions are: i) how was the experience of an individual converting to another religion? ii) What is the meaning of the religious conversion process?

5. Types of Research

This research is a qualitative research with interpretative phenomenology analysis method

6. Focus of Research

This research will focus on two things. First, this will focus on the experience process of a person who converts to another religion by looking at the relationship with family and social environment, self-inner turmoil, and also in beliefs and traditions. Second, this research focuses on the meaning of that person in converting to another religion.

7. Research Subjects

There are two subjects of this research, which experienced religious conversion in at least two years prior. This limitation was imposed to make sure the subjects are those who still remember the experience of conversion and also all the problems they faced, thus can still retell their experiences well. Both subjects live in Jogjakarta. One of the biggest city in Indonesia that contains a lot of cultures and religions and also a lot of conversions. Based on criteria described above, the subjects were chosen using a criterion sampling method.

8. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interview thus enabling a dialogue between researcher and participant. Aside from that, the researcher would also have an opportunity to dig more information regarding interesting things during the interview. The researcher used guided open questions according to the focus of the research so as not to direct subjects answer to a favorable one and could dig more information from subjects.

9. Data Analysis Method

This research used the Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA) to explain signs in subject's psychological world [14]. Steps taken in IFA are: searching for themes; connecting available themes; and connecting themes to other cases.

10. Validity

This research used communicative validity where researcher re-confirmed interview transcript to subjects; then subjects could do correction in parts of the transcript that is

not true in reality. The researcher also used argumentative validity where the validity can be achieved if the present finding and conclusion can be followed well rationally, while also can be proven by re-checking the raw data. This process can be read in the fourth chapter and attachment.

11. Perceived toward Previous Religion and Turning Point

The research used two subjects who convert to another religion. Both subjects always wanted to convert to another religion since they were kids. This desire appeared in the first subject since the age of 12, while the second subject started to have this thought since the age of 10. Both subjects decided to convert because they feel more comfortable with the new religion and thought that converting is a spiritual calling in their lives.

12. Response toward Nuclear Family

After converting, both subjects gave different responses regarding their main family. The first subject said, even though the parents have a different religion from the subject, the main family were very supportive of subject's decision to convert. While in the case of the second subject, there was a conflict inside the subject after converting to other religion. Both the father and the mother held different beliefs. The father believed in subject's old religion, while the mother followed subject's new religion. The subject's father wishes the subject would follow his religion. But in the end, subject decided to convert to the new religion. Because the subject is afraid of the rejection from the father, the subject's conversion remains a secret from his father up until now. In the other hand, the subject is burdened by having to keep lying to the father regarding the conversion. This creates conflict in the subject, thus every choice the subject made will always be risky. Nevertheless, the subject promised that the subject would tell the father when the time is right.

13. Response toward Extended Family

Different responses from both subjects were also found when they faced the opinion of the extended family. In the first subject, the subject found rejection and sarcastic allusion from the extended family regarding the conversion. The first subject tried to face the issue by ignoring the allusion from the extended family, tried to avoid chatting

about religion, and tried to hold the thought to retaliate the comments from extended family because that is not a good thing according to Javanese tradition and culture. The first subject managed to go through all of these because this subject received a lot of support and good acceptance from the family. In the second subject, the subject was dumbfounded when the extended family managed to find out that second subject was not holding the old religion anymore. As previously mentioned, this second subject tried to keep the conversion as a secret. But even after knowing that, the extended family does not really have any problem with the conversion; they even tend to accept the decision to convert.

14. The Changes Related to Religious Conversion

Both subjects do not feel any change after subjects went through religion conversion process. This is because both subjects have already desired for the conversion since they were small and already follows rituals of the new religion.

Thus, the religion conversion process experienced by both subjects can be interpreted as follow:

- (i) The soul's call to achieve convenience and peace.
- (ii) The choices in life to achieve convenience though it contains some risks.
- (iii) To release the burden in life that has long withheld them. In this case, their desire to convert that held them back all these times were released. Thus subjects can do religious rituals and functions wholeheartedly.

15. Conclusion

The religion conversion process experienced by both subjects can be interpreted as follow (i) the soul's call to achieve convenience and peace; (ii) the choices in life to achieve convenience, though it contains some risks; (iii) to release the burden of life.

16. Limitation

The researcher used only two subjects. This caused the experiences of the converted subjects relatively the same and the discovery of the meanings obtained relatively similar. Further research can multiply the number of subjects so that the richness of experience glimpsed would increase, and meanings that can be drawn from the

experience would also grow. Also, the two subjects appeared to have harbored the desire to convert for a long time, so the conversion process is not really dramatic. However, in some cases religious conversion is dramatic and quite sensitive, especially for the people of Indonesia, so researchers should be able to build a good rapport. With a good rapport, the subject can feel comfortable to share their experiences.

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