THE QUALITATIVE STUDY ON RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AMONG MUALLAF

Gazi Saloom[1], Zulfa Indira Wahyuni[2]
{gazi@uinjkt.ac.id[1], zulfa.indira@uinjkt.ac.id[2]}

Faculty of Psychology, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta

Abstract. This study aimed at describing and explaining psychological process of religious conversion and its impact toward subjective wellbeing among muallaf (converters to Islam) in Indonesia. The study used qualitative method with interview as main technique in collecting data. 9 respondents who have converted to be Muslims and 1 respondent who has converted to Christian were interviewed in several places in Jabodetabek. The interviews have been done by student of psychology faculty, both those from magister program and those from bachelor program. After transcription the interviews, data was taken and analysed with qualitative analysis technique through several steps. The study concluded that religious conversion was impacted by two mains factors, personal or psychological factors and social factors. It was concluded also that religious conversion had big impact toward subjective wellbeing of the respondents, in particular happiness and calmness as main dimensions. The result of the study was discussed and some recommendations were delivered.

Key Words: Psychological process, conversion, wellbeing, converter

1 Introduction

Religious conversion in particular that related to conversion into Islam among Indonesian celebrities has been interesting issue in media both social media and mainstream media. Newest information on religious conversion among celebrities is about Roger Danuarta who have decided to be Muslim or muallaf from his old religion, Christian. Roger decision to convert into Islam is a big decision that happened through long quest for significance, winding psychological dynamic and complex experience [1].

Religious conversion issue is studied and discussed in many sciences such as Islamic studies, sociology of religion, anthropology of religion and absolutely psychology of religion. Academic study on religious conversion particularly in psychology of religion can be traced to first year of 1881 when G. Stanley Hall, delivered series of lecturer on religious conversion in Christian tradition in special tradition of South America Protestant [2].

As one kind of behaviour and psychological issue, religious conversion surely can't be released from general formula about behaviour that initiated by Kurt Lewin and

Allport. It was mentioned that people behaviour is a function of personal factor and environment factor, it is used to be depicted with special symbol. $B = f (P+E)$. It can be said that personality or internal factor and social environment or external factor together can influence someone to make big decision in his life including that related to religious conversion.

There are many variables influencing religious conversion, as LaMonte and his colleagues for example said that political and religious experiences have significant effect toward religious conversion [3], Morris mentioned indoctrination and brain washing as factors influencing conversion from religion with peace approach to religion with violence approach [4] whereas Husin insisted that dakwah or religious preaching can be significant factor in religious conversion [5]. In this context, it can be mentioned that a qualitative study on political attitude change from violence to peace has concluded that personal experiences, group dynamic process and national social political change can make individuals converting from one affiliation to other affiliation [6].

It was concluded that age change could influence attitude and behavioral change of individuals including that related to religious matters [7]. In general, religious ideas, the tendency of older men to worship and focus with religious activities and rituals is normal doing. It is because awareness of death that will take them. In the contrary, the young people would focus to world matters.

 Some studies for example [8] found that anxiety toward death in elder people could explain why do religious conversions happen, both intra religion context and inter-religions context. In the study that was conducted by Duff and his colleagues, it was found that anxiety toward the death was related to age and religiosity. The elder the individuals the higher their anxiety toward the death, but the more religious the elder individual the lower their anxiety toward the death [8].

 Some cases of inter-religious conversion, both from non-Islam to Islam and from Islam to non-Islam in Indonesia has been interesting issue that attracted to be discussed and studied from many point of views [9]. In recent years, interreligions relation harmony in Indonesia has been facing some obstacles and problems that need to be solved by many people including academicians and researchers.

Indonesian Muslims as majority among populations in perspective social psychology has been facing problematic relation with the others in Indonesia [9]. It was certainly casuistic matters or in other world it happened among few people in every religion. In general, it can be said that religious harmony in Indonesia has not facing any problem significant and as a nation they are still in one understanding that Indonesia is their home togethers.

 The viral case about inter-religions misunderstanding that happened in first week of Desember 2017 was persecution toward Ustad Abdul Shomad, a lecturer of Syarif Qasim State Islamic University and Islamic preacher graduated from the University of Al-Azhar Kairo Egypt and the University of Darul Hadis Maroko. This preacher was rejected by some people grouping in The Componen of Bali people who claimed their selves as the representatives of Bali people including secular and Kejawen Muslims.

Their doing was based on an argument that Abdul Shomad was perceived as threat for Pancasila existence in its capacity as state foundation and the unity of Indonesia as nations state. This accusation was objected by UAS and his followers because it contradicted the fact that attached to UAS. There are some arguments to this rejection. First, UAS was scholarship holder from the government of Republic of Indonesia for

studying in Alazhar University, Kairo Egytp in which one of the precondition was to love Indoneisa dan succeeded in Pancasila examination. Second, UAS was a lecturer of official state at UIN Syarif Qasim as it was known that he must have pledged to loyal to the State. Third, UAS is Islamic preacher and teacher who visited isolated region and ethnic such as Talangmamak Etnic in Riau to teach how to love Indonesia as could be seen in social media particularly in YouTube.

It is interesting to note that while many Muslim clerics and preachers experiencing some persecution, there are many cases of conversion from non-Islam to Islam happening in Indonesia. This raised some questions that must be answered by psychologists particularly those focusing their studies on psychology of religion or religious behaviors. How do they explain it in particular from psychological science perspective?

Religion and Daily Life

Religion is essential part of daily life among Indonesian people including those of Muslims [10]. The correlation between religion and mental health received much attention from social researchers [11]. In this context, studies that have been conducted in decades consistently found positive correlation between many aspects of religiosity and well-being. The studies revealed that religious people are those who have higher well-being than those atheist people [12].

For this sake, one indicator of well-being is good relation among people who are interacting in daily life among different groups with different ethnic and job including different religions. This issue has not been yet studied and discussed in some literatures on subjective well-being whereas social relation or interpersonal relation has been determinant aspect that effects wellbeing. Social relation or interpersonal relation that indicated social well-being is main theme in this article. According to us, this essay has pivotal position in studying well-being.

Based on above explanation therefore this article insists on correlation between religiosity and social well-being among Indonesian new Muslims or muallaf. some questions that would be answered are about the process of religious conversion among Indonesian converters or muallaf, how does its effects toward subjective well-being and whether religious conversion also effects their social well-being?

Religious Conversion and Social Wellbeing

Some studies found that correlation between religious belief and psychological well-being was positive and high. It meant that the higher level of religious belief the higher level of psychological well-being. It was found in many studies that relationship between religious belief and social well-being among Non-Western individual, for example that among black Americans was more positive than White people. It was interesting that the relationship between the two variables or factors was mediated by social psychological aspects such as religious attribution of self-development and positive social identity that have strong relationship with religious affiliation of individuals. One of examples for such those predictions was examined in a set of sample that consist of 66 Black students and 59 White students. The salience of religious belief and psychological well-being positively correlated in moderate level and it only happened among Black students. The correlation between religious belief and well-being partially mediated by attribution toward God so that it can enhance meaning of life and positive social identification that pushed by religious affiliation of individuals [13].

The effect of religion toward mental health was discussed and debated for several years among experts but theories of correlation of the two have been examined empirically at half of this century. There are many constructs has been correlated with religion such as anxiety that has been never noticed [14]. In this context, Neiger dan Edeilsen have reviewed recent literatures on religion and general index of anxiety in particular regarding study findings about low anxiety with religiosity or high anxiety with religiosity or no correlation between anxiety and religiosity [14]. In other words, study's findings were divided into 3 categories: religiosity negatively correlated with anxiety, or negatively or no correlation between the two concepts.

The meaning of life is identified as a potential mediator that links between diversity and psychological health [15]. Both researchers have tested the hypothesis in two studies using various methods and measurements of religion and well-being. In the two studies, the meaning of life mediates the relationship between diversity and life satisfaction, self-esteem and optimism. In addition, using the experience sampling method, the two researchers found that life meaning also mediates the relationship between daily religious behavior and well-being [15].

The question of whether religious conversion causes changes in one's personality is tested in two collections of literature, namely a collection of research literature on personality change and research on conversion [16]. When theory and research on personality change are applied to answer the question whether conversion causes change. [16] emphasize that the answer to that question is very dependent on the level of personality to be studied. Their results suggest that research on the relationship between religious conversion and behavioral, attitudinal, emotional and lifestyle variables is very consistent with that assumption [16].

Although conversion has a negative impact on elementary functions such as the trait or the "Big Five" temperament, conversion results in life that transforms change deeply at the mid-level functions such as goals, feelings, attitudes and behaviors, as well as personality functions that better define themselves. like the identity and meaning of life. The impact arises both in the context of a sudden or gradual conversion process, active or passive, and both towards traditional Western or Eastern religions or against new religious movements [16], [17], [18]. Paloutzian et al. Acknowledged that the weakness of the research was because it was retrospective and cross-sectional and the program was not systematic [16].

Well-being is often combined with subjective wellbeing, especially among the community of psychology disciplines. For example, [19] defines subjective well-being as a general evaluation of a person's quality of life. The concept of subjective well-being is conceptualized with three components, namely: First, cognitive assessment that one's life has reached a good level (life satisfaction); Second, experience pleasant levels of positive emotions; third, experience a negative mood at a low level.

True welfare refers to dimensions that are diverse and interrelated with each other. These dimensions include physical dimensions, mental dimensions, and social dimensions that go beyond traditional health definitions. Welfare includes choices and activities aimed at achieving physical vitality, mental balance, social satisfaction, complete feelings and personal fulfillment [20].

In the field of psychology, there are at least three sub-fields of psychology that discuss welfare, namely: First, developmental psychology. In the perspective of developmental psychology, psychological well-being is analyzed in the context of patterns of lifelong growth.

Second, personality psychology. Usually the experts use the concept of self-actualization from Maslow, the concept of full personal functions from Roger, the concept of individuation from Jung, and the concept of maturity as a way of explaining the welfare of Allport. Third, clinical psychology where it is affirmed that the loss of mental illness is the main characteristic of psychological well-being [21].

2. Method

This study uses qualitative methods by selecting 9 converts to become respondents or resource persons. The 9 people were known as converts based on their recognition and information from their social networks. They were interviewed in various locations around Jakarta by a research team who then transcribed the interview results verbatim. Data from interview results were analyzed using qualitative analysis techniques according to the research objectives.

The main technique in analysing the data was thematic analysis. All data and information that has been gained through interviews was transcribed. Through several discussions that was held by the team, some categories based on special themes relating to objectives of the study. Eventually, the categories made to be correlated to each other, and the theory that explained between them was established.

3. Finding and Discussion

Based on the analysis of the results of qualitative research, it can be concluded that conversion occurs through a long process in terms of time. Each individual from the participants of the study goes through different processes and dynamics to get to the condition of religious conversion. This confirms the assumption that religious conversion is a personal process experienced by individuals even though external or social influences cannot be ignored [22].

At least there are two main factors that explain why individuals experience religious conversion, namely personal factors and environmental factors. Personal factors concern peak experiences or spiritual experiences that can only be felt by individuals themselves, past trauma experiences, perceptions of individual origins or genealogies as part of Muslims, and fascination with many things inherent in Islam and Muslims. This applies to all types of human behavior that psychologists analyze [23].

In general, religious conversion experienced by participants has an impact on changes in psychological conditions. In other words, religious conversion affects the psychological well-being of participants. Psychological well-being includes feeling happy, feeling comfortable and feeling safe from various anxieties and confusion [24].

The results of this study illustrate that religious conversion is a long psychological and social process. So far it has been mentioned in the literature that religious conversion can occur suddenly and gradually. Based on research experience in the field of religious conversion and / or behavior relevant to the process of behavior change such as personal transformation, radicalization, deradicalization and repentance among criminals, the authors argue that religious conversion as other behavioral processes is a phenomenon of behavior that occurs in a short time [25].

It is possible, what is referred to as sudden conversion by researchers and experts in various literatures is related to what is seen by naked eye and occurs on the surface. Because, actually the conversion of religion is not only related to behavior that appears visible and on the surface or in psychology terms only related to overt behavior but also involves turbulent

intra-psychic dynamics. Therefore, it can be said that religious conversion is a series of psychological mechanisms that occur internally or intrapsychically and externally, both interpersonally and even between groups [26].

From the overall analysis of the results and research data found several keywords that can then describe the process of religious conversion in individuals. There is an existential crisis about divinity and religion, the search for answers, the discovery of meanings and answers, calm and the discovery of a new identity or new birth with a new identity.

The results of the qualitative research on religious conversion are in line with the findings in a number of studies on personal transformation or deradicalization that the author himself had done before. For example, the author's dissertation study about leaving the road of terror to terrorists in Indonesia, especially terrorists affiliated with Jamaah Islamiyah (2016). In that research, the author found that the decision of the terrorists to abandon the path of terror was complicated and through long psychological and social processes. Psychological processes are generally associated with a crisis of identity and trust in the authority above such as a mentor or senior in the movement, terrorist dissonance about a mismatch between expectations and reality encountered in the network and the world of terror.

This research is also in line with other findings from the dissertation, namely that after a new identity as a new person in another world or another group is found, a sense of comfort and confidence or feeling about a new meaning arises. Or it could also happen other things namely resistance or attack on the old identity and belief that was left behind. Resistance and assault on old identities and beliefs is carried out in a way that exceeds the way the old faithful adopted the new religion or group. The question is why did that happen? The answer to this question requires other research so that psychological variables or social variables will be found that explain why that happened?

The results of the research on the process of religious conversion are also in line and in line with the results of previous research findings about personal transformation experienced by certain circles in society, namely criminals who experience a personal transformation from evil to godliness.

Religious conversion is an important issue related to behaviour change in humans. In general psychology studies, especially social psychology, human behaviour is influenced by two general factors namely personal factors and social environmental factors. The latest findings state that in addition to these two factors, there are other factors that influence the developmental factors or in other languages, process factors and dynamics that occur in humans. When referring to social learning theory, this development factor or process is called the behavioural factor itself.

In the context of religious conversion, these three things are found as driving and attracting factors for the conversion of religion to human believers or humans without religious faith. This research found that personal factors such as personality and internalization of values and experiences influence decisions changing from one religion to another or from one religious understanding pattern to another pattern of religious understanding. But the personal aspects of a person are not in a vacuum. That is, the dynamics experienced by individuals personally and then pushes or pulls them towards change, both in the form of personal transformation, conversion of religion and beliefs but influenced by developmental factors or in other languages the behavioral factors of that individual naturally interact with environmental factors. So, referring to the theory of social cognition consisting of three factors, personal, behavioral and environmental can explain why individuals experience religious conversion.

Personal factors, for example in the form of character, character, personality, attitude, or even pathological problems experienced by individuals. While the experience or development

factors can be in the form of personal or interpersonal or even inter-group dynamics very strongly explaining why religious conversion occurs. Furthermore, social environmental factors are important factors that cannot be ignored. In fact, in many cases the influence of the environment ranks highest among a number of factors or elements that explain why religious conversion occurs. In the psychology literature, it is mentioned by many experts that personal factors are believed to be very influential on religious conversion. For example, the most classic statement from William James, known as the Father of Religious Psychology, stated that melancholic personality is very vulnerable to the dynamics of changing beliefs such as religious conversion. Other classic views such as those mentioned by Guy E. Swanson mention that the birth order in children or the order in the family is related to the tendency of religious conversion. The findings of Swanson mention middle children tend to be prone to convert to religion [27].

Related to this research, which is an effort to see the relationship or influence of religious conversion on individual psychological well-being, it can be said that in many cases experienced by respondents and sources, religious conversion brings calm and freedom from anxiety so that it can focus on carrying out daily activities [28]. The results of this research are in line with previous studies, for example research that emphasizes that religiousity has a positive and significant effect on improving mental health. These researches have been developed and implemented in various parts of the world, both in the West and in the East [29].

Among informants or research respondents, religious conversion caused them to be very interested in spreading religious teachings and inviting others to make conversion decisions. This is based on the belief that the new religion (Islam) adopted is true religion originating from God the Creator; Islam is the way of salvation in the world and the hereafter, and Islam is the only religion that proves itself to unite all the prophets and apostles that have ever existed in the world with the teachings of tawhid.

4. Conclusion

Conversion of religion and its influence on mental health or wellbeing seems to need to be continued, especially for the Indonesian context which has been experiencing high dynamics in inter-group relations including relations between religion or between groups in one religion. This is important because the religion is a core and central part of the daily life of the Indonesian people.

Eventually I have to confess that this article has many weaknesses and lacks in particular those related to procedures of research that we couldn't explain well . This article also has many shortages in editorship and grammar, so I promise in future I would like improve my English writings by consultation to English experts and using many tools that help enhancing English writing.

5. Acknowledgment

References

[1] https://www.liputan6.com/showbiz/read/3680739/mantap-masuk-islam-ini-alasan-roger-danuarta

[2] Longo, G. S., & Kim-Spoon, J. *What drives apostates and converters? The social and familial antecedents of religious change among adolescents.* Psychology of Religion and Spirituality. (2014). https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037651

[3] LaMothe, R. W. Varieties *of Political-religious Experiences.* Pastoral Psychology. (2012). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-0110383-2

[4] Morris, E. *Children: extremism and online radicalization.* Journal of Children and Media. (2016). https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2016.1234736

[5] Husin, A. *Philosophical and sociological aspects of da'wah: A study of Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia.* ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (1998).

[6] Reinares, F. *Exit from terrorism: A qualitative empirical study on disengagement and deradicalization among members of ETA.* Terrorism and Political Violence. (2011). https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2011.613307

[7] Streib, G. F., Cumming, E., Henry, W. E., & Parsons, T. *Growing Old: The Process of Disengagement.* American Sociological Review. (1962). https://doi.org/10.2307/2090049

[8] Duff, R. W., & Hong, L. K.. *Age Density, Religiosity and Death Anxiety in Retirement Communities.* Review of Religious Research. (1995). https://doi.org/10.2307/3512068

[9] Fulljames, P. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations: Introduction. In Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations.* (2015). https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410500142916

[10] Arifianto, A. R. *Explaining the cause of Muslim-Christian conflicts in Indonesia: Tracing the origins of Kristenisasi and Islamisasi.* Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. (2009). https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410802542144

[11] Roff, L. L., Butkeviciene, R., & Klemmack, D. L. *Death anxiety and religiosity among Lithuanian health and social service professionals.* Death Studies. (2002). https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180290106517

[12] Abdel-Khalek, A. M., & Lester, D. *Religiosity, health, and psychopathology in two cultures: Kuwait and USA. Mental Health, Religion and Culture.* (2007). https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670601166505

[13] Blaine, B., & Crocker, J. *Religiousness, Race, and Psychological Well-Being: Exploring Social Psychological Mediators.* Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin. (1995). https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672952110004

[14] Shreve-Neiger, A. K., & Edelstein, B. A. *Religion and anxiety: A critical review of the literature.* Clinical Psychology Review. (2004). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2004.02.003

[15] Steger, M. F., & Frazier, P. *Meaning in life: One link in the chain from religiousness to well-being.* Journal of Counseling Psychology. (2005). https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.4.574

[16] Paloutzian, R., Richardson, J., & Rambo, L. *Religious conversion and personality change.* Journal of Personality. (1999).

[17] Smilde, D. *Relational analysis of religious conversion and social change: Networks and publics in latin american evangelicalism.* Conversion of a Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America. (2007).

[18] Society, I., Psychology, P., & Psychology, P. *The Political Personality of Japan : An Inquiry into the Belief Systems of Diet Members.* Political Psychology. (1996). https://doi.org/10.2307/3792132

[19] Dreier, O. *Review: The Meshing of Learning and Identity in Education Stanton Wortham, Learning Identity:* The Joint Emergence of Social Identification and Academic Learning. Theory & Psychology, 18(1), 133–135. (2008). https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354307083500

[20] Halama, P., Martos, T., & Adamovová, L. *RELIGIOSITY AND WELL-BEING IN SLOVAK AND HUNGARIAN STUDENT SAMPLES: THE ROLE OF PERSONALITY TRAITS.* Studia Psychologica, 52(2), 111–115. (2010). https://doi.org/Article

[21] Blaine, B., & Crocker, J. *Religiousness, Race, and Psychological Well-Being: Exploring Social Psychological Mediators.* Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin. (1995). https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672952110004

[22] Morris, M., Eberhard, F., Rivera, J., & Watsula, M. *Deradicalization : A Review of the Literature with Comparison to Findings in the Literatures on Deganging and Deprogramming Project Leads,* (May), 1–13. (2010).

[23] Brewer, M. B., & Hewstone, M. *Applied Social Psychology*. Perspectives on Social Psychology. (2004).

[24] Smilde, D. *Relational analysis of religious conversion and social change: Networks and publics in latin american evangelicalism.* Conversion of a Continent: Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America. (2007).

[25] Scroggs, J. R., & Douglas, W. G. T. *Issues in the psychology of religious conversion.* Journal of Religion and Health. (1967). https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01532239

[26] Dunn, M. G., & O'Brien, K. M. *Psychological health and meaning in life: Stress, social support, and religious coping in latina/latino immigrants.* Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 31(2), 204–227. (2009) https://doi.org/10.1177/0739986309334799

[27] Barresi, J. *From 'the Thought is the Thinker' to 'the Voice is the Speaker'*: William James and the Dialogical Self. Theory & Psychology, 12(2), 237–250. (2002) https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354302012002632

[28] Duhrssen, A. [*Religious experiences and psychotherapeutic methods*]. Zeitschrift Fur Psychosomatische Medizin Und Psychoanalyse. (1978).

[29] Pitulac, T., & Năstută, S. *Choosing to be stigmatized: Rational calculus in religious conversion.* Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies.(2007).