

FORMATION AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE CONVERSION PROCESS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ADULT CONVERTS

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Abstract

Religious conversion, which includes leaving one's religion for another religion or change within the same religion, is among the most popular subjects of the psychology of religion and the sociology of religion. This study analyzes via a psychosocial methodology the process before, during, and after a change in the faith of individuals born in an Islamic culture and who distanced themselves from religion for a certain period of their lives. The pool consists of twenty-seven participants. The study employs a qualitative research method and a structured interview technique. The interview is an abridgment

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of the form created by Köse (1996) designed to focus on the childhood and youth of participants, as well as on their family relationships, identity crises, and changes during or after decision-making processes. Content analysis is applied to the findings. Most participants, who indicated that they had not received formal religious education during childhood, expressed that situations such as getting beat up, being ostracized and come across superstitions led to their religious disgruntlement. Some female participants indicated that they distanced themselves from religion during their youth because of the negative image of women created by cultural and religious values. Participants, particularly males, indicated that they made decisions to recover from their addictions prior to intrareligious conversion process. In addition, intellectual motives come to the forefront in the process of intrareligious conversion; factors such as coming across as good believers and having a religious community are influential. Having made the decision to return to their faith, participants often reported that they enjoy peace and feel special and free.

Key Words: Religious conversion, interreligious conversion, intrareligious conversion, religious transformation, intellectual motive, religious coping.

I. Introduction

Religious conversion is one of the essential topics of the psychology of religion and the sociology of religion. The issue became a subject of study in the late 1800s and established its place among the earliest areas of concern for the psychology of religion. The earliest specialists in the psychology of religion, such as Edwin Starbuck, William James, Stanley Hall, and Robert H. Thouless, touched upon this problem in their works.¹ Early studies focused on intrareligious conversion in the United States of America. Later works, particularly after the 1950s, concentrated on transitions between different religions,² whereas spiritual change became a common

¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: The Fontana Library, 1960), 194; Robert H. Thouless, *An Introduction to the Psychology of Religion* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1923), 205.

² Victor Solomon, *A Handbook on Conversions to the Religions of the World* (New York: Stravon Educational Press, 1965).

subject in relation to religious conversion, as spirituality was incorporated within the psychology of religion in the 1980s.³ The relevant literature⁴ shows a wide spectrum of meaning for the concept of religious conversion. This concept is used for both momentary and gradual and both temporary and permanent changes. The concept of religious conversion may indicate becoming devout or retreating from religion within the same religious culture or even leaving the religion of a certain culture in order to join another religion. In other words, religious conversion may include returning to religious life in the sense that an individual returns to the religion that he/she neglected to practice for a while, conversion from another religion to Islam, abjuration of Islam for another religion, becoming deist through adoption of God but denial of religion, or even becoming an atheist, that is, the denial of religion and God.⁵ In addition, concepts such as *intrareligious conversion* and *interreligious conversion* are used in the literature⁶ to clarify the direction and extent of religious conversion. Nevertheless, the concept of religious conversion fell short of expressing the entire change experienced by individual with regard to religious and sacred space and his/her quest for meaning. Accordingly, the concepts of *spiritual conversion* and *spiritual transformation* were added to the relevant literature, particularly after the 2000s.⁷ Certain studies have been carried out in Muslim societies about religious conversion; nevertheless, the majority of studies are based on Judeo-Christian societies. Studies within the Judeo-Christian tradition address religious conversion in the context of both intrareligious and interreligious aspects, whereas studies in the Muslim world or by

³ Robert A. Emmons and Raymond F. Paloutzian, "Din Psikolojisi: Dün, Bugün ve Yarın," in *Din Psikolojisi: Dine ve Maneviyata Psikolojik Yaklaşımlar*, ed. and trans. Ali Ayten, 2nd ed. (Istanbul: İz, 2012), 13-18.

⁴ Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (London: Kegan Paul, 1996); Kate Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008).

⁵ Ali Köse and Ali Ayten, *Din Psikolojisi*, 9th ed. (Istanbul: Timaş, 2019), 141; Hasan Kayıklık, "Bireysel Yaşamda Dinsel Değişim" in *Arayış, Değişim ve Din*, ed. Hasan Kayıklık (Adana: Karahan Kitabevi, 2017), 7-10.

⁶ Yaniv Fox and Yosi Yisraeli, eds., *Contesting Inter-Religious Conversion in the Medieval World* (London: Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315574028>.

⁷ Emmons and Paloutzian, *Din Psikolojisi*, 13-18.

Muslim scholars in the West deal with the problem in terms of interreligious conversion.⁸ In other words, the latter concentrated on Westerners who converted to Islam or even Turks who converted to Christianity. More precisely, religious conversion within Muslim culture is rarely examined;⁹ besides, there is a lack of studies that comprehend the process before and after such conversion.

This study is about religious conversion. In other words, this study analyzes the evolution of changes in the faith of individuals in Islamic culture as an example of interreligious conversion. The return to religion is an individual experience; nevertheless, psychosociological processes such as relationships of the individual with family and social circle are influential in this process, where the life of an individual undergoes radical transformation and reconstruction of identity through substantial configuration. It is necessary to scrutinize the entire life of an individual since the process of conversion takes place under the impact of various factors that influence the individual's life and the maturation of these factors within that life. In this regard, the study provides a psychosocial analysis of the process from childhood until the present situation of the participants in order to understand how the process of conversion emerged and matured. Interview questions are determined to identify what happens during childhood, adolescence, the decision-making process to convert, and later on. Questions are gathered under three groups, namely, the psychosocial and spiritual changes before, during, and after the process of conversion. Accordingly, the research seeks answers to the following essential questions:

1) What kind of relationships did individuals who have undergone a religious conversion process have with their parents during childhood? How do they evaluate their family environment and parent attitudes? What kind of a childhood did they have in terms of conveyance of religious values? What was the general course regarding religious learning and living during adolescence?

⁸ Bayram Sevinç, *Hristiyan Olan Türkler ve Türk Misyonerler* (Istanbul: İz, 2006); Esra Özyürek, *Being German Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁹ Sema Eryücel, "Religious Conversion in University Students," *Turkish Studies* 13, no. 17 (2018), 123-140, <https://doi.org/10.7827/TurkishStudies.14159>.

2) What did they experience in the process of deciding to make intrareligious conversion? Did they undergo any traumatic or mystic experience? Were any individuals or groups influential to the decision-making process? How long did the decision-making process take, and what were the significant incidents during this period?

3) What psychosocial and spiritual changes were experienced following the process of intrareligious conversion? What were the reactions of the inner circle of the individual? What difficulties did the individual undergo in the process of achieving a new identity after conversion? Which positive and negative emotions were experienced after conversion? What changes has the individual made in his/her life in regard to religious belief?

II. Methodology

The survey employs an interpretive phenomenological approach within the scope of a qualitative method for the exploration of the interpretation of various experiences about individual processes of intrareligious conversion. A structured interview is used as a data collection tool. The interview form developed by Köse¹⁰ to study religious conversion processes of converted British was translated into Turkish and used by the researchers. Since the study discusses intrareligious conversion, certain questions are modified after consulting clinical psychologists and experts in the psychology of religion, in line with intended purpose. Questions in the interview consist of three essential sections. The first group includes questions about the relationship that the individual who returned to religion had with his/her family and religion during childhood and adolescence. The second group of questions deals with incidents, individuals, groups, and activities that influenced the decision-making process during religious conversion. The third group of questions seeks to investigate emotional changes, relationships with inner circles, and novelties in the individual's life following the process of intrareligious conversion.

Workgroup

A total of 27 participants were obtained by means of snowball sampling within the scope of the survey. Females composed 59.2% ($N=16$) of the population, while the remaining 40.8% ($N=11$) were

¹⁰ Köse, *Conversion to Islam*, 208-210.

males. Ages ranged between 18 and 64, with an average age of ($M=38.7$). Almost half of the participants ($N=14$; 51.8%) had an education background equivalent to or above the university level, while the remaining were graduates of primary school ($N=3$; 11.2%), secondary school ($N= 2$; 7.4%) or high school ($N=8$; 29.6%).

Data Collection

The snowball technique was used to reach participants, beginning with immediate circles of researchers. Participants consisted of individuals who resided in Istanbul who have experienced intrareligious conversion at a certain period of their lives and have not changed (not undergone deconversion) since then. Another criterion was that a minimum of two years must have passed since conversion in order to better contextualize the process within the background and aftermath. In addition, participants were chosen from different age groups to reflect the generation gap and differences in the perception of religious conversion. Participant interviews were carried out face-to-face by researchers in a location set by the participant (cafeteria or workplace). Each interview took approximately one hour. Twenty-seven participants were considered a sufficient sample size since the survey attained theoretical saturation. Sound records, taken by courtesy of participants, were recorded on paper and rendered available for analysis by researchers. Texts were analyzed by researchers through manual coding and content analysis without the aid of qualitative analysis software. The three stages adopted for preparation of questions (preconversion, decision-making process, and post-conversion) were used in the same manner during analysis, and findings were interpreted in the same order.

Data Analysis, Reliability, and Validity

The survey employed an abridged form of interview that focuses on the family relationships of participants and their access to religious transfer during childhood and youth, identity and meaning crises, and changes during the decision-making process and after conversion. The collected data were handled in terms of credibility and transmissibility in order to ensure the validity of the interview questions. *Expert review* was used in order to enhance credibility. For higher transmissibility, expressions by participants were directly transmitted on relevant occasions, and a comprehensive description

was carried out. *Consistency* and *confirmation reviews* were made for reliability. Each researcher performed separate coding, and the results were eventually compared. In addition, the analysis and results of the survey were also reviewed by clinical psychologists and experts in the psychology of religion.

III. Findings and Interpretation

This section examines findings and relevant interpretations that were collected with a qualitative method and put to content analysis under three essential titles, namely, the changes before, during, and after the process of conversion.

A. The Period before Conversion: Childhood, Youth Experiences, and Familial Factors

As indicated above, it is necessary to examine childhood and youth experiences as well as religious orientation, in the family of the individual prior to conversion in order to better understand the process of religious conversion and returning to religion. Indeed, most relevant studies¹¹ deal with the process of conversion or the return to religion after childhood. Likewise, the survey comprises questions about childhood, familial factors, and youth experiences that are thought to influence the process of conversion.

1. Childhood Experiences and Familial Factors

During childhood, children are both physically and emotionally dependent on parents or caretakers. In addition, this is the stage when the individual is very sensitive to what is going on around

¹¹ Orhan Gürsu, "Travma, Din ve Psikoloji: Acıyı Bal Eylemek," *Türk Akademik Araştırmalar Dergisi Uluslararası Multidisipliner Kongresi Bildiriler* (2018), 315-322; Heon Choul Kim, *Din Değiştirmenin Entelektüel Arka Planı* (Istanbul: Kaynak, 2003); Orhan Gürsu, "Günümüzde Tasavvuf Yoluyla İslam'a Yönelişin Sosyo-Psikolojik Analizi" (master's thesis, Bursa: Uludağ University, 1999); Zainab Ajoke Oshun, "Hıristiyanlıktan İslam'a İslam'dan Hıristiyanlığa Geçişin Psiko-Sosyal Sebepleri: Nijerya Örneği Üzerine Bir Araştırma" (master's thesis, Bursa: Uludağ University, 2010); Celal Çayır, "Türkiye'de Din Değiştirip Hıristiyanlığa Geçişin Psiko-Sosyal Etkenleri" (PhD diss., Bursa: Uludağ University, 2008); Süreyya Canbolat, "Türkiye'de 1986-2002 Yılları Arasında Hıristiyan Olan Müslümanlar Üzerine Bir İnceleme," *Marmara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 27 (2004), 87-103.

him/her and when the first seeds are planted for possible future changes and transformations. Therefore, the following questions were posed to participants in order to understand which elements in childhood were influential on their return to religion: Whether their parents were alive, their relationship to their parents, the existence of grandparents, subjective perception about family environment, whether he/she received religious education, the source of such education – if any, the piety level of parents, the individual status about practice of religion, memories about religious life, and negative aspects that led to religious displeasure.

According to the responses about the lifestyle of the family during childhood, parents of 20 (80%) of the participants were alive and married, families of 6 (24%) of the participants occasionally hosted grandparents, and most participants did not push their imagination or memory about this issue. It is fair to say that at minimum, the better part of the participants had a nuclear family structure where both parents were alive and together and grandparents were seen upon occasional visits. Therefore, it is reasonable to think that their perceptions about religious life are rather molded by religious life and the orientations of parents.

In families where parents are alive and together, children are expected to have an optimistic approach about family life unless they are involved in traumatic incidents such as violence, alcoholism, or serious illness. Nonetheless, such expectations may be misleading given the possibly high rate of unhappy marriages that do not end in divorce. For the subjective perception of participants about family life, 9 (36%) participants mentioned a “warm, reliable, affectionate” family life, 1 participant did not want to talk about it, while one said he did not want to go back to childhood; in other words, 2 participants (8%) had an unhappy childhood, whereas the majority did not give any information about this issue.

An assessment of the responses about the piety status of parents showed typologies of traditional piety and faith piety. The majority of participants (68%) responded that their parents are “traditionally pious.” In this respect, traditional piety means worship is performed in an imitational manner or even pursuant to environmental factors, not due to a high level of consciousness or education. On the other hand, the mother may be more pious than the father, or the father may be more of a perfectionist than the mother in regard to piety. For

some participants (38%), their parents were “seasonally pious;” namely, they fast only during Ramaḍān and are moderate towards religion but do not practice most types of worship. Some statements by participants about the piety of their parents are given below:

My father was not a pious man; he just did not drink and fasted in Ramaḍān. Likewise, my mother only covered her head and fasted in Ramaḍān. We had nothing to do with religion except for Ramaḍān... They told me that my granny began performing *ṣalāb* only upon the reproach by a relative who said: “Your hair turned white, won’t you still perform *ṣalāb*?” (Participant 5, Female).

My father has performed *ṣalāb* regularly since I was 11. My mother began to hinder *ṣalāb* during the period when she changed the nappies of her kids, due to lack of religious knowledge... Now, she does not cover her head but performs *ṣalāb* and recites Yāsīn (Participant 12, Male).

The piety status of my parents can be described as imitative and traditional (Participant 4, Female).

As a child, I used to attend summer school at mosque at the age of 5-6, like every Muslim kid; otherwise, I have not been in any religious institution such as İmam-Hatip [High School], Qur’ān Course, etc. My parents are Kemalists; they do not practice religious rituals but are strict believers and merciful persons. They used to fast (Participant 25, Male).

My parents are not pious at all. It is a Kemalist family... My family used to live together. In this regard, I have no complaint about my parents. A great family, always fulfilling their duties. They were in a decent financial situation. We lacked a lot about religion. My grandparents were around. We were living in the same block. They say that my grandparents used to perform *ṣalāb*, but I don’t remember at all (Participant 14, Male).

According to answers about institution and source of religious education during childhood, participants did not undergo formal religious education but attend mosques or similar schools in summer or contented themselves with prayers taught by the family. For family, we can consider, in the order of intensity, despotic religious education, nonrepressive and moderate religious education by the father, or even indifference. The most common types of worship during childhood were occasional recital of the Qur’ān, fasting,

şalāb, and prayers. The concept of prayer was often mentioned as *reciting prayers* (for example, Participant 2, Female); therefore, they were probably prayers not created spontaneously but rather taught and memorized.

Absence or insufficiency of religious education may be one of the reasons behind abstention or distance of participants about religion. According to studies on religious conversion,¹² most participants have undergone limited or no religious education. Indeed, as the following examples show, the form of religious education and prevention of misperception about religion are important for the processes of religious conversion and returning to religion, as are high or low levels of religious education.

Presumably, participants who do not practice or remain distant from religion during a certain period of their lives may adopt such an attitude because they experience or witness an incident that causes displeasure about religion during childhood. Examples such as witnessing beatings in mosque or dismissal from mosque, hatred towards a religion teacher, superstitions practiced by the family or imposing religious education are presented below in the words of participants:

I got no religious education; when I was a kid, we used to attend Qurʾān courses during summer holiday. Back then, hodjas used to beat children if we could not memorize a certain prayer. Their objective was not to teach religion but to alienate you from religion. They attained their purpose (Participant 14, Male).

The mosque I attended had a disturbing environment. Repressive, if you like. There were some kind of persons who were shy. I was seven or eight years old; during *şalāb*, I was dismissed from mosque because of misbehavior such as giggling. I never returned to mosque until I was 25. It was a standoff, and I didn't want to go through the same thing again (Participant 21, Male).

¹² Hayati Hökelekli and Celal Çayır, "Gençlerin Din Değiştirip Hıristiyan Olmasında Etkili Olan Psiko-Sosyal Etkenler," *Uludağ Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 15, no. 1 (2006), 23-46; Eryücel, "Religious Conversion in University Students," 123-140; Hüseyin Peker, "Din Değiştirmede Psiko-Sosyolojik Faktörler" (PhD diss., Ankara: Ankara University, 1979); Yusuf Sinan Zavalı, "Türkiye'de Hıristiyan Olan Müslümanlar: Psiko-Sosyolojik Bir Araştırma 1990-2010" (PhD diss., İstanbul: Marmara University, 2011).

I was very bad at memorizing. My religion teachers compelled us to memorize Qurʾān verses and failed those who couldn't. This is why I was always having difficulty with religion lessons ... Because of the stories my mother told, I thought Allah would turn me into stone if I did something wrong. In fifth grade, during a football game with friends, I said "... (insult) of Allah," rather than "stupid of Allah." I was very scared, as I thought I would turn into stone. But I didn't. Then, I lost my fear of Allah (Participant 16, Male).

When I was a kid, my grandfather had meningitis and became deaf. We had a relative, like an older brother. I asked him why my grandpa went deaf. He answered: Allah makes some people deaf to take *adbān* away from them. Thereupon, I was alienated from religion and Allah. What kind of an Allah was that? (I perform *ṣalāb* at the moment). That was a test, a test for grandpa and us (Participant 24, Male).

Completely negative. My religion teacher was the most fainthearted man in my life. I had a different perception of religion that merely consisted of *ṣalāb*. In the fifth or sixth grade, my father was very insistent about *ṣalāb*. If I was in a room visible to my dad through a window, I bowed down on to the prayer rug but did not actually perform *ṣalāb*. If I was somewhere he couldn't see, I just sat on the rug ... Besides, my dad did not allow me to wear trousers; but I think it was not something religious, rather because he thought trousers were masculine. I never wore trousers until I married; I still don't if I am to meet him. Likewise, he wouldn't let me wear pajamas (Participant 22, Female).

As seen above, the factors that alienate participants from religion arise from misguiding attitudes and misbehaviors of not only family members but also representatives of religion. Superstitions, which are passed down through religious discourse, can no longer answer the questions that children have today since the level of education has become much higher than it was in past generations. Punishments in the name of Allah and religious education that overlooks individual differences have led to alienation from religion or to non-adoption of religious culture.

2. Religious Experiences during Adolescence

To determine the religious intellectual development of participants during adolescence, questions were raised about whether they

questioned religion, if they did, what were the common subjects of such questioning; substance/alcohol addiction; compliance/noncompliance with social norms; whether they experienced alienation in individual, social or religious contexts; participation in a political or religious group; and curiosity about other religions.

According to the responses about whether participants questioned religion during adolescence, most female participants (64%) made such inquiries because of gender discrimination in the religion or in the family because of religion. This fact brings along the perception of an unfair and punishing God and therefore a negative attitude towards religion. The following statements clearly demonstrate this fact:

In my childhood, I apparently did not leave the perception of religion imposed by society; however, I never really lived the religion imposed by society. Indeed, the system, imposed as religion, meant obedience to a system of obeying the father until marriage and then obeying the husband. You were indoctrinated and imposed to satisfy their egos, not your own. My discontentment about religion is because nothing happens as it is told. I broke away from religion at about 13. It was all about a burning and punishing Allah, with everything *ḥarām* and sin, and such understanding was lauded principally by women. Questioning was often about gender. Why am I woman if all is a sin for them? (Participant 4, Female)

I thought the family of my uncle were true believers, and I never wanted to be pious since I was disturbed by their behaviors. For example, they never schooled their daughter and were angry with my dad because I attended school; they treated women very badly. I had nothing to do with religion during adolescences. I never thought of becoming pious, since they were very rude, inconsiderate, and disrespectful to women (Participant 5, Female).

I began to have a consciousness about religion during adolescence. My questions about religion were rather about gender. I thought, for example, “no matter how proper a subject I am to Allah, I can never go to heaven as a woman” (Participant 9, Female).

The problem for women in Islam, arising from gender discrimination, has been a much-debated issue¹³ among those who

¹³ Necla Arat, *Kadın Sorunu* (Istanbul: Edebiyat Fakültesi Matbaası, 1980); Turan

adopt defensive, accusative, or idealizing discourse.¹⁴ During adolescence, participants display a rather accusative attitude about gender discrimination. According to a study about individuals who converted from Islam to Christianity, most participants (80.3%) complained about gender discrimination in Islam.¹⁵ The emphasis on gender discrimination brings along perception of a God who judges pursuant to unfair prerequisites; consequently, reconciliation for individuals who have such a perception of religion is either delayed or never takes place.

As for answers about alcohol or drug addiction during adolescence, most participants are smoking addicts and occasionally drink, whereas 20% had serious substance addiction in youth but gradually recovered upon conversion.

In light of relevant answers, participants who have undergone radical changes in their lives are more rebellious and have a more critical approach about social norms; nevertheless, the better part of participants did not experience alienation. Participants who report alienation saw themselves outside of society for reasons such as intolerance to injustice and criticism of the gap between religious discourse and practice:

Noncompliance with religious norms was always there. Inconsistency emerged due to differences between what is said and done, which brought about alienation from society (Participant 4, Female).

I was the rebel kid in the house, as well as in society. I could not tolerate cruelty, injustice, lies, and treachery (Participant 24, Male).

I was obstinate. I could never tolerate injustice (Participant 22, Female).

Dursun, *Tabu Can Çekişiyor: Din Bu*, 3rd ed. (Istanbul: Kaynak, 1991); İlhan Arsel, *Şeriat ve Kadın*, 3rd ed. (Istanbul: Kaynak, 1989); Beyza Bilgin, "İslam'da ve Türkiye'de Kadınlar," *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 36 (1997), 29-43, https://doi.org/10.1501/Ilhfak_00000000875; Bekir Topaloğlu, *İslam'da Kadın*, 19th ed. (Istanbul: Ensar Neşriyat, 2004); Caner Taslaman and Feryal Taslaman, *İslam ve Kadın* (Istanbul: İstanbul Yayınevi, 2019).

¹⁴ Sıddık Ağçoban, "Kadın Olgusunun Kültürel Gelişimi ve İslam'da Kadının Yeri Üzerine Tartışmalar," *Uluslararası Kültürel ve Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi* 2, no. 1 (2016), 14-24.

¹⁵ Canbolat, "Türkiye'de 1986-2002 Yılları Arasında Hıristiyan Olan Müslümanlar Üzerine Bir İnceleme," 103.

Moral issues become more important during adolescence; the sensitivity among participants about inequity and injustice drove them to criticize social norms, to social alienation, in their own words. Nevertheless, given what they tell in general, the condition of participants does not truly correspond to alienation¹⁶ that is closely related to concepts such as withdrawal, apathy, insensitivity, and normlessness; rather, they see themselves different from society since they criticize the religious and moral aspects of society.

Regarding the status of belonging to a religious or political group, the majority of participants (72%) did not join any religious or political group in youth; some of those who joined a religious group (20%) indicated that they soon left such a group due to the dissatisfactory level of religious consciousness.

Problems about religion during late adolescence and early adulthood often match with those in adolescence; nonetheless, the cognitive level of inquiries increases, and participants not only criticize religious ways of living in society but also have difficulty comprehending the logic behind certain religious discourses. In addition to gender discrimination, inquiries about issues such as superstitions, sealing of heart, names of Allah, and divine justice also influence alienation from religion.

The only issue that I possessed in youth was the extreme burden imposed on women. Women were always under pressure, and this made me feel uncomfortable. I asked: "Is this what religion commands me?" but I still consented and covered my head, thinking "Well, if it's a commandment." (Participant 8, Female).

My inquiries began during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. I used to read about every subject. I became an atheist as I continued reading, and I kept reading as I became an atheist. During my time at war academy, the religious community called X took issue with me. They used to come together to purchase heaven. They had a house. They saw themselves completely different. Their manners alienated me from religion. ... This wasn't the true religion, but I perceived it in this way (Participant 25, Male).

¹⁶ Faruk Karaca, "Din ve Yabancılaşma: İmkânlar, Fırsatlar ve Tehlikeler," *İlahiyat Akademi Dergisi* 2, no. 3 (2016), 45-54.

In consideration of answers about curiosity among participants regarding other religions, more than half have no interest, whereas 9 participants (36%) have sought information about other religions, particularly Christianity. Such indifference is explained by participants through the fact that they had nothing to do with any religion, including Islam, they have no doubt about the fact that Islam is the true religion, or even they believe other religions are distorted. Those who analyze other religions, Christianity above all, state that such a process of comparison drew them closer to Islam instead of alienating the, from it:

I used to question a lot why the followers of other religions would go to hell even if they are very good persons; I still question and seek information about it. My interest in other religions was to learn their rituals. This is why I often visited churches in youth. When I thought about Jesus as he was and the people around him, I could not connect that impression with the atmosphere in churches. Perhaps I saw distortion of religion in this (Participant 9, Female).

As I learn about Christianity, I understand Islam better and thus can reflect Islam in my way of living (Participant 11, Male).

Once, there was a foreign TV series, where a girl prayed to Jesus. I remember imitating her and praying in the same manner while playing. "May God save Jesus," I prayed. Back then, I didn't know what Islam was. I searched about other religions; I like comparisons. I tried to learn their ways of worship (Participant 3, Female).

I was interested in other religions in order to learn about them. I read the Old and New Testaments a bit. Their logic did not make sense to me. That chosen status of Jews, confession and clergy in Christianity, and Jesus as son of God were not for me in terms of logic and reason (Participant 12, Male).

In brief, inquiries during adolescence are rarely based on the question "Is there a God?"; rather, the essential factor behind alienation in this period is based on wrong attitudes about Muslims regarding religious ways of living and an erroneous transmission of culture, including gender discrimination. Moreover, the intellectual level of inquiries goes slightly higher, whereupon superstitions are filtered through logic and eliminated; accordingly, certain factors, such as reactions against differences between religious discourse and acts in society, weaken positive perception about religion.

B. Psycho-sociological Transformation during the Process of Conversion

This section concentrates on psycho-sociological transformations of individuals in the process of conversion (the process that includes the period when questioning and inquiries begin, the decision-making process, and the period just before conversion) within the scope of relevant literature and interviews. In this context, the problem is addressed in three subsections, including auxiliary elements in the process of conversion (how or by what means the individual explores religion, traumatic incidents, or similar affections), whether the individual had any mystic experience in the process, and the decision-making process, in order to zoom in on the psycho-sociological transformation in the process.

1. Auxiliary Elements in the Process of Conversion

Participants were asked how they rediscovered religion; about any auxiliary elements, individuals or groups in the process of conversion; about any incidents that lead to decision-making, and whether they had any traumatic experience in order to identify the elements influential in the process of conversion. According to their answers, it is possible to assert that the rediscovery of religion varies depending on the individual. Some participants were reacquainted with religion by means of a group, while some mentioned the importance of individual interaction. In addition, some participants reported that they underwent conversion by reading books, through contemplation, because of curiosity about religion or even in the wake of a traumatic event.

The following statements are presented as an example of how certain participants were influenced by a person or group within religious conversation circles or by listening to or being informed via such conversations through technological means (radio, television, social media, etc.):

I rediscovered religion by means of the group I met (Participant 1, Female).

Acquaintance with a devout person was influential to me. Radio shows had a deep impact on my religious conversion (Participant 4, Female).

Radio shows and some individuals were influential on my process of finding the true path (Participant 1, Female).

I had a pious neighbor. A literature teacher, whom I met by means of this neighbor, had also eventually found the true path and was working as sewing teacher. I went to her for sewing courses, and I was impressed (Participant 5, Female).

... I listened to lots of conversations; indeed, I always listen to daily religious conversations online (Participant 13, Female).

As shown in the foregoing examples about the rediscovery of religion, some participants rediscovered religion upon meeting a group, while some were influenced by friends or neighbors. In addition to coming together in the same environment, some participants reported that they made use of technological means and listened to various radio programs, followed online conversations and were influenced by them. In short, individuals in the process of seeking a meaning were exposed to virtual or real emotional affections that met their quest and demand for meaning in the process.¹⁷ Recent studies emphasize that religion can be learned and lived online. Such technological developments pave the way for a different development and change beyond traditional schemes in regard to access to religious information and practicing religion.¹⁸ This transformation is apparent in the processes of conversion. Indeed, as participants express, most individuals have been subject to exposures that can start, support, and finalize processes of guidance by means of traditional media and the internet.

Individuals may sometimes question the meaning of life for them in the face of certain difficulties that push them towards loss of meaning and control; they can even think they have lost a sense of control. In such periods of the coping process, an individual may follow two paths, namely, protecting or changing the meaning. In such a situation where it is impossible to preserve the meaning, the change of meaning may acquire a religious context. In such cases, the

¹⁷ Christopher Helland, "Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet," *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1, no. 1 (2005), 1-16.

¹⁸ Lorne L. Dawson, "Researching Religion in Cyberspace: Issues and Strategies," *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, ed. Jeffrey K. Hadden, Douglas E. Covan (London: An Imprint of Elsevier Science), 27.

individual reviews his/her life in religious and spiritual terms and may undergo a religious transformation process. In this respect, traumatic events may have a triggering effect on religious/spiritual transformation.¹⁹ According to studies carried out in the West and Turkey about religious conversion, traumatic experiences are among stimulating elements for individuals with regard to religious conversion.²⁰ Participants indicate that feelings such as loneliness and unhappiness in the wake of traumatic events influence the process of conversion. There are certain studies that assert that religions are effective in weathering traumas and recovering from pathologies that may appear after trauma.²¹ It is possible to say that the psychological state and existential inquiries of participants lead to a quest, whereupon they establish a closer bond with religion. In short, for some individuals, the process of conversion may become a part of the religious coping process. The following statements seem to approve this assertion:

Traumas I went through led me to embrace the religion even more. Each negative impact from the environment revived me, and I went into religion wholeheartedly (Participant 3, Female).

As I came back from the army, I felt alone since my brothers were married and I could not feel comfortable at their homes; my parents were both dead. For a while, I was on my own, I moved away from everyone. I began to perform *şalâh* since He was all I had (Participant 21, Male).

¹⁹ Ayten, *Tanrı'ya Sığınmak: Dini Başa Çıkma Üzerine Psiko-sosyal Bir Araştırma* (Istanbul: İz, 2012), 56.

²⁰ Mona Alyedreessy, "British Muslim Converts: An Investigation of Conversion and De-Conversion Processes to and from Islam" (PhD diss., London: Kingston University, 2016), 91; Zavalısız, "Din Değişirmenin Psiko-Sosyal Kodları," *Çukurova Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 12, no. 2 (2012), 193; Hökeleklı and Çayır, "Gençlerin Din Değiştirip Hıristiyan Olmasında Etkili Olan Psiko-Sosyal Etkenler," 26; Eryücel, "Religious Conversion in University Students," 123-140.

²¹ Gürsu, "Travma, Din ve Psikoloji," 315; James K. Boehnlein, "Religion and Spirituality after Trauma," in *Understanding Trauma: Integrating Biological, Clinical, and Cultural Perspectives*, Laurence J. Kirmayer, Robert Lemelson, and Mark Barad, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 260, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511500008.018>; Ayten, *Din ve Sağlık* (Istanbul: Marmara Akademi, 2018).

... Nothing satisfied me; I was always unhappy. My process of finding the true path began as I became familiar with Allah and resorted to Him, and when I was convinced, He was capable of moving me away from all sources of unrest (Participant 5, Female).

I was not happy with my life and myself. During such a difficult period, I could not sleep until dawn after *sabūr* [pre-dawn meal during Ramaḍān]. I opened the Qurʾān and came across the chapter al-Ḍuḥá, which I had never read or known before ... I read: “*Your Lord has not taken leave of you, nor has He detested you.*” I broke down into tears; it was all over for me at that moment. It was a moment like a non-Muslim reciting *shabādah* for the first time to convert to Islam (Participant 12, Male).

Throughout interviews, some participants reported that they wondered and read about religion to rediscover it on their way to conversion. Some participants compared Islam with other religions through curiosity and inquiry, whereas others rediscovered Islam by searching about a certain aspect of it. Relevant studies put forth that intellectual curiosity and questioning are among the essential motives behind religious conversion.²² In this framework, it is possible to say that intellectual sense of wonder and inquiries start the process of conversion. The following statements by participants may serve as an example:

Having questioned the Bible and Christianity, I chose Islam, another monotheistic religion. I live in a Muslim society, and this fact evidently had an impact; however, I chose this wonderful path in the wake of my own efforts and research and not under the influence of others (Participant 26, Male).

The beginning of research at the end of inquiries and Turkish translation of the Qurʾān (Participant 11, Male).

I discovered religion because of curiosity. I wondered and sought information (Participant 6, Female).

According to the interviews, those who reportedly rediscovered religion through the Qurʾān emphasized that they read Turkish

²² Ali Köse, *Neden İslam'ı Seçiyorlar: Müslüman Olan İngilizler Üzerine Psiko-Sosyolojik Bir İnceleme* (İstanbul: İz, 2008), 126-130; Mecit Altun, “Müslüman Olan Almanlar Üzerine Psiko-Sosyal Bir İnceleme” (master’s thesis, Adana: Çukurova University, 2012), 70.

translations [*ma'āl*] rather than the original Arabic version. This preference may be due to lack of knowledge to read in Arabic or even to better understand the Qur'ān in their process of conversion.

I compared what I knew beforehand with what I learned from the Qur'ān. Its feature that distinguishes the truth from the falsehood (its being the criterion [*furqān*]) helped my heart to rest (Participant 7, Female).

During my decision-making process, the Qur'ān was my only guide. What set me free and made me happy as a subject was verse 130 of al-Nisā³ and verse 30 of al-Furqān. The verse with extensive meaning where Rasūl Allāh complains to his Lord about his people, namely, “*O my Lord, indeed my people have this Qur'ān as a thing abandoned,*” is one of the main motives for me find the true path (Participant 9, Female).

I read nothing except for the Qur'ān and books of ḥadīth. In that period, I completely read the translation of the Qur'ān. Beforehand, I used to cast a glance now and then, but I didn't know how to perform *ṣalāb* and had nobody to teach me; back then, there wasn't so much information on the web, either (Participant 21, Male).

2. Dreams and Religious and Mystic Experience

Within the scope of this study, interviewees were asked whether they had any mystic and/or religious experience. Participants reported that mystic and religious experiences are influential at the stage of rediscovering religion. Literature examination reveals individuals who converted to Islam in the wake of a religious-mystic experience.²³ Likewise, studies tell about individuals who start, accelerate, or end their process of conversion by means of a dream or mystical experience during the period of inquiry or putting things in order while having a life distant from religious culture.²⁴ Such experience has been a breaking point or milestone for participants who began to seek information and question religion and steered

²³ İrfan Başkurt, “Yaygın Din Eğitimi ve Sosyo-Psikolojik Açından İhtida Hadisesi: Üsküdar, Kadıköy ve Beyoğlu Örneği,” *İstanbul Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 14 (2006), 176.

²⁴ Gülüşan Göcen and Büşra Gügen, “Türkiye’de Din Psikolojisi Alanında İhtida Üzerine Yapılan Araştırmaların İçerik ve Yöntem Bakımından İncelenmesi,” *İslâmî İlimler Dergisi* 12, no. 3 (2017), 96.

towards religion through repentance under such influence. Interestingly, a general glance at the interviews herein shows that the time of mystic experience varies depending on gender. Female participants often report mystic experience after making the decision to make intrareligious conversion, whereas male participants rather undergo mystic experiences before conversion. In this context, a separate study about the impact of gender on the process of conversion may contribute to the literature. Relevant statements by participants are given below:

I was watching TV with my wife. I heard a voice from deep inside my ears: "Get up and perform *ṣalāb*, get up and perform *ṣalāb*." Okay, I thought, I will. But I still heard the same voice: "Get up and perform *ṣalāb*." It was the small hours. Then, "No," the voice said: "Perform your morning *ṣalāb*." I recited Basmalah, and began thinking something is wrong, something is wrong, I probably did something wrong. Then, I found and opened a *ṣalāb* guidebook to learn how it is done, and then I did. I performed all five times of *ṣalāb*: at noon, in the afternoon, evening, and night. The following morning, the same voice was with me again; this went on each prayer time for fifteen days (Participant 14, Male).

I was on drugs together with friends. On the morning of the same day, I had taken pills for attention deficit, hyperactivity disorder, and something else. As I took all together, I began to hallucinate and had a bad trip. I was sure I would die. I wanted to resort to Allah, but my sins were swimming before my eyes. Yet again, I begged Allah for mercy. Religion teachers, who I hated, had told how forgiving Allah was. That day, I survived that trip and came round. Upon recovery, I had a sense of embarrassment, I felt duty-bound to Allah ... Finally, I recited *shahādah*, browsed the web for details of *ghusl* (complete ablution) and gratitude *ṣalāb*, and performed my prayer. I guess the relief at that moment was a hint for my present inner peace (Participant 16, Male).

When I was in jail, I had a dream of our Prophet. After prison, I continued to live in the same way for a few months. Nevertheless, I always woke up at the hour of *ṣalāb*, and this gave me a burden on the heart. There was a hodja for a community in Istanbul. I asked him about the situation: "I had a dream, and I have been restless since then." Hodja asked about my dream, and I told him "I am an assistant to our Prophet; he takes me wherever he goes. But he has consigned

me nine gold coins, and I breach this trust. Thereupon, I am attacked by lions with manes. I am stuck. I look at our Prophet, and he smiles back to me.” Hodja responded: “If a Muslim saint had such dream, his rank would go even higher. For ordinary people such as you and me, their sins are absolved. You will go to Heaven. Indeed, Satan cannot don the guise of our Prophet.” I have beaten and broken the hearts of so many people, I have drunk a lot; what do I have to do with heaven?” “Well, what about the gold coins?” I asked. He answered: “Prophet had no gold. His gold is his Sunnah. You have stolen his Sunnah. What is Sunnah? It is *şalâb*.” Then, I performed ablution and noon *şalâb*. Therefore, it was Allah Who sent the dream, as well as its interpreter (Participant 24, Male).

... I swim in clear waters, my face sunward, sunbeams up on my face, a peaceful swim ... Then, the water suddenly gets contaminated; turbid, disturbing. I don't mind and continue swimming ... After a few more fathoms, I don't care about polluted water anymore ... The water gets so dirty I cannot even swim, it becomes a kind of marsh ... The marsh gets so solid I cannot swim; it is dark all around ... At that moment, I elude this servile feeling and begin to swim sunward, fresher than ever ... I never thought about this dream which I had about three or four times. After conversion, however, as I decided to “rebuild my life,” I can comprehend the meaning of these dreams. Alḥamd li-llâh... (Participant 11, Male).

I both had a religious experience and a dream. The dream came during the period of questioning. At my times of inquiry, I asked questions such as “Are there really phenomena such as resurrection? If there are, how can I accept them?” During this period of inquiries, a tree in our garden was struck by lightning, before blooming back in summer; reanimation of the dead tree guided me in understanding resurrection. In the same period, I used to have a dream where I was burning. I saw myself as two different persons. In one, I stood still as a purified person, whereas I was burning in the other. The burning me, exposed to fireballs, stretched her arm to the other me for help. The other replied: “I want to save you, but I will burn too once I touch you.” Such and similar dreams and sayings lasted for a long while (Participant 4, Female).

The death of my father had a great influence on my performing *şalâb* five times a day. My experience at his grave was hugely influential. I don't want to tell more about this. That feeling in that moment was

more real than anything else I lived on this world. I began to perform *ṣalāh* regularly under influence of that experience (Participant 12, Male).

As indicated above, some participants reported they began the process of conversion because of mystic experience, whereas some underwent a mystic and/or religious experience during the process. Having dreams is the most common experience. Dreams are perceived as “divine messages” or “warnings” by participants and influenced them in the process. A great majority of participants reported religious and mystic experience after the beginning and during the ongoing process of conversion; nonetheless, there are also participants who say they have not experienced any such event.

3. Decision-Making Period

Another question worth answering in the process of intrareligious conversion is the duration of the period required to become reacquainted with religion. For some participants, it took three hours to make a decision about intrareligious conversion, while some others took approximately three years. The duration of the process varies depending upon the individual. In consideration of all interviews as a whole, the bond between individual and religion, his/her experiences, way of perceiving religion, requirements and intensity of questioning may lead to a process that ranges between three hours and three years. Then, again, some participants clearly remember the duration, while some describe the process with more hesitancy.

It took me three hours to decide to practice religion in my life. I can remember this very clearly ... (Participant 2, Female).

The decision-making process lasted about a year. The first six months were dominated by intense inquiries, whereas I became gradually more assured in the following period (Participant 1, Female).

The decision-making process lasted approximately three years; indeed, I had made up my mind, I was on a quest; I performed *ṣalāh* secretly, but I disclosed my decision at the end of third year (Participant 26, Male).

Three days. I got lost in that book I was talking about (Participant 22, Female).

Initial inquiries took about four or five months. This process extended to one year until assurance ... (Participant 8, Female).

It did not take too long to decide. Indeed, the innate elements [*fiṭrah*] that are encoded into human nature and that call us to the true path were galloping whenever they saw truths; the same applied for me, and it didn't take long. One year, I may say, one year at the most (Participant 9, Female).

Given the psycho-sociological transformations during the process of conversion, some participants underwent transformation on the basis of individual experiences, while some were influenced by social circles. For studies on religious transformation and religious conversion, the model of religious conversion motives created by Lofland & Skonovd²⁵ has been employed in numerous studies. This model indicates that intellectual, emotional, experimental, and mystic motives come to the forefront during the religious conversion process.²⁶ Likewise, intellectual, emotional, and mystic motives emerge during the rediscovery of religion according to our study. A holistic reading shows that individuals rediscover religion and become involved in the process of conversion under the motivation of requirements about which they have the strongest feeling of deficiency. In light of the interviews, the first behavior following the decision-making process is *repentance and praying*. It is observed that following the process of conversion, individuals, first of all, tend towards the worship form of *ṣalāb*, probably to concretize the process to which they have committed themselves. In addition to *ṣalāb*, female participants have also attempted to veil themselves, while males tried other means such as abstaining from alcohol. The process after conversion is treated more comprehensively under the title below.

C. Psychosocial and Spiritual Changes after Conversion

Within the scope of relevant literature and interviews herein, the present section dwells upon difficulties and changed experienced by

²⁵ John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 4 (1981), 373-385, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1386185>.

²⁶ Göcen and Gügen, "Türkiye'de Din Psikolojisi Alanında İhtida Üzerine Yapılan Araştırmaların İçerik ve Yöntem Bakımından İncelenmesi," 96.

individuals in social life after conversion. For this purpose, interviewees are asked questions to determine their experiences in the wake of conversion, such as feelings after the decision, possible changes in future plans pursuant to faith, and reactions of their family, friends, and inner circle about the decision.

1. Positive Feelings after Conversion

Participants were asked: “What did you feel after the decision?” in order to determine the positive and negative emotions of individuals in the wake of conversion. Participants often expressed that they felt better after the decision. Individuals indicated that they were become stronger, more peaceful and “in a permanent state of peace,” so to speak. The following expressions exemplify the positive emotions of participants after conversion:

I felt an indescribable peace and strong relief in my conscience (Participant 2, Female).

I had a huge sense of peace and happiness. I was as light as a bird. I no more feared death. Indeed, I was now friends with the owner of death (Participant 5, Female).

Having decided to follow the right path, I was, as the phrase goes, up in the clouds. I cannot say enough to describe that feeling of freedom. My Lord granted me a license to do anything, just watching His restrictions. I was the richest, happiest, and strongest I had ever been. From then on, any negative or positive incident, any person I met on the street or on the balcony or any conversation with others was a Qurʾān verse about creation and existence ... (Participant 9, Female).

Relief, lift, permanent peace (Participant 11, Male).

After the decision, I felt as if I was reborn (Participant 13, Female).

Certain social scientists define religion as individual orientation towards God in terms of spiritual functions and sincere encounters with Him. This encounter is a meeting in which the soul entirely participates. Accordingly, faith has a deep impact on individual emotions. Indeed, faith responds to various requirements, desires, hopes, anguishes, and grievances of the soul. Therefore, any hope, anguish, and grief in the soul of an individual make sense within

belief in God.²⁷ Processes of conversion emerge in an interconnected manner with numerous problems in individual life. Usually, individuals struggle with severe cognitive and affective inquiries, disappointments, and difficulties prior to conversion. To leave doubts behind and attain a state of relative stability and to feel how the Almighty responds to prayers and His mercy is with him/her have a positive impact on the individual in psychological and spiritual sense, and such benefits are reflected in life satisfaction and well-being of individuals. Nevertheless, such well-being is not limited to psychological aspects and includes spiritual aspects. Expressions such as “inner peace” and “permanent peace” made by participants point to this fact.

In the wake of conversion, positive emotions such as inner peace and happiness are common; likewise, self-confidence, feeling special, and feeling a sense of freedom can be observed. Some participants state that their love of and confidence in themselves were on the rise following the decision, whereupon they began to feel special and free. Such self-confidence and feeling special and free are precursors of eventual changes in the life of the individual. Having regained self-confidence, an individual gets the motivation required to change his/her life. He/she feels stronger than before. He/she is no more alone since Divine Might is with him/her by means of prayers. Past deeds and hitches obtain a new, different meaning. Thus, the individual undergoes an inner transformation and may also opt for changing his life in a concrete manner. Indeed, when participants decided to look at their lives through a different perspective, many negative emotions are replaced by positive ones, and they review life with regard to meaning, values, and goals. Examples of several statements by participants about their feelings of self-confidence and freedom, as well as their attitude towards making new decisions in life, are given below:

I felt strongly confident after making up my mind. It was a significant sense of relief, purification, and assurance. My emotions were quite positive. I learned to take any event more patiently and tolerantly (Participant 4, Female).

²⁷ Kerim Yavuz, “Din Psikolojisinin Araştırma Alanları,” *Atatürk Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 5 (1982), 87-108.

I felt special and free. There was no obstacle between me and my Lord. I began to feel more confident in society as a woman. I moved away from superstition. I began to proceed in the company of revelation (Participant 8, Female).

My spiritual solitude came to an end after the decision. I was able to say “I have Allah” following any problem, difficulty, or grief (Participant 16, Male).

My view of life changed. I began to see nature and everything through a different perspective (Participant 15, Female).

Alcohol was now meaningless and void; it was perhaps about aging and maturing. I felt I lived in vain; when I went to bed, I thought: “I will die and I will die as I am.” After the decision, I had spiritual satisfaction and happiness. “I am alone no more,” I thought. Even before I began performing *ṣalāh* and still drank, I was aware Allah always saw me, even though I reproached Him in hard times; from then on, however, I began to feel much closer to Him (Participant 21, Male).

2. Doubt and Remorse after Conversion

When asked about how they felt after conversion, individuals often mentioned positive emotions and decisions serving as a foundation for positive changes in life. Participants were also asked if they had any doubt or remorse because of their decision to determine whether they actually experienced such feelings. In consideration of their answers, individuals had certain doubts and hesitations about how religion is practiced and about the attitudes and behaviors of the devout; nevertheless, they had no doubt or regret about their decision or the essence of religion. Relevant views of participants are provided below:

I had no regrets. My change was a right one. I had no regret about this; getting back to my former self would be a return to mischief (Participant 8, Female).

I had no doubt or regret about my decision. I never asked if I did the right thing. I set my heart on this path, so to speak. Allah willing, I will not return (Participant 26, Male).

I was shy and hid from people; I questioned what I was doing. You have nothing to do with all these; look how you used to live and how you are living now. You have nothing to do with Sufism or piety, I

thought. However, once I tasted the love, all came to an end (Participant 14, Male).

All these communities pushed me to question how religion is understood, but I had no question about the existence of Allah or the essence of religion. Once I was on the course, I felt religion and the devout were two different things. Moreover, I felt Islam in the Qurʾān never hangs you out to dry; it ceaselessly reinforces your confidence and instills peace. I also felt that the religionists, on the contrary, generate disappointment. This contradiction is still ongoing, but I don't leave *ṣalāh* because of anger against the imām... (Participant 18, Male).

Pursuant to foregoing opinions, individuals who experience religious conversion do not have any doubt or regret. The situation may be explained through the natural structure of the process of religious conversion and returning to religion. That is, religious conversion is a process of serious questioning, hesitancy, inquiry, and decision-making for most individuals. The person prefers religious conversion as a response to various problems and states of affairs, as well as a search for meaning in life. In a sense, the return to religion is the final preference and final decision. Individuals did not make this decision easily and chose it as a final exit. This is probably why they are content with the decision and have no doubt or regret.

3. Faith-related Changes after Conversion

The questions, “What kind of changes have you made in your life?” and “Did anything change in your life plans in line with your faith?” were asked of participants in order to identify how individuals reflect their feelings and thoughts about life after conversion and what kind of future plans they made pursuant to faith. Participants indicated that after conversion, they noticed what is right or wrong in their lives, became more stable and tidier, made decisions in line with their belief, and abandoned former negative habits, addictions, and friends. Individuals who have a stronger desire to change were able to realize this radical change in a more rapid and definite manner. Those discontent with their past had a stronger motivation for rapid and radical change in their lives. Evidently, one of the most striking changes after the process of conversion is to become devout. Many participants reported that they underwent significant change with regard to learning religion, practicing and transferring such

knowledge to others, whereupon they influenced themselves and their environment in this respect:

First, I made *ṣalāh* a routine for me; then I found out why I wore *ḥijāb*. This sort of thing. I care more about the environment I am in. I orientate my children in the same manner ... (Participant 15, Female).

I clung on to worship, I tried to read the Qurʾān in Turkish regularly and strived to learn Arabic. I finished the entire Qurʾān in translation. My thoughts about my future spouse have changed; I now want a wife with religious sensitivities (Participant 11, Male).

I tried to establish the place of *ṣalāh* in my daily life; I began to advise my family and environment in this respect. I am aware that whatever I have is from Allah. I can recover more easily. I changed my profession to become more helpful to others ... (Participant 23, Female).

Having had intrareligious conversion, participants reportedly underwent a period of self-development in terms of awakening, awareness, and responsibility. Accordingly, the period after conversion is considered a beginning for a new process of a kind of maturation and self-actualization in which uncompleted past goals can be achieved through a more positive perspective, mistakes can be repaired, and negative environment and addictions can be avoided. This change is more visible in female participants.

I became aware of what is right or wrong in my life; I dismissed the wrong and reinforced the right. My plans and goals changed and developed in a religious context (Participant 1, Female).

I began to make my own decisions. My academic education began. I was a primary school graduate; I am a faculty graduate now, and preparing for master's degree. My change contributed a lot to this process. Religion influenced my entire life (Participant 7, Female).

Now I am a more determined and conscious subject capable of making her own decisions, displaying her will, and being submissive. I learned to produce and build myself; my life plans have changed; I began to school in order to relate the beauty of revelation. My thoughts and view of life have changed substantially (Participant 8, Female).

My most radical decision was to move away from my former circle of friends. I no longer see any friends I used to have back then. Indeed,

when I quit drinking at the age of 27, it was my circle of friends that pushed me in that environment back again; even though I wanted to draw away, I had a social circle that liked going to bar, drinking, and letting loose. In such an environment, you inevitably have a sense of belonging to this setup and become involved. I had to move away, and I changed my social life (Participant 21, Male).

Studies on interreligious conversion demonstrate that such conversion often brings along a change of identity. More precisely, when a British or German person converts from Christianity to Islam, he/she assumes a new identity. Therefore, interreligious conversions lead to more intense conflicts about identity, national identity above all.²⁸ Since this study deals with intrareligious conversion, there are no findings about identity conflicts. Rather, participants indicated that they became more devout after conversion; the process was comprehensive enough to have an impact on giving meaning to life, determination of lifestyle, appointment of social circle, clothes and habits. For them, the process led to a transformation in the sense of awareness and responsibility, nourished higher empathy towards others and supported self-actualization and maturation.

4. Reactions of the Inner Circle after Conversion

According to relevant studies, when the conversion takes place in an interreligious manner (e.g., converting to Islam in Britain or to Christianity in Turkey, etc.), the convert may be exposed to severe negative reactions. Such a negative reaction may come from a colleague, an unknown person in the street, or even close relatives or friends.²⁹ In line with the purpose of analyzing a return to religion, this study includes questions to measure the reactions by the inner circle of the individual to his/her decision to convert. According to the answers of the participants, they received various reactions from their inner circle. Some participants related that their family and friends had a positive attitude towards their decision and ensuing changes in life; this attitude supported the adaptation process to the change and new lifestyle after conversion. Support by relatives and friends ensures higher well-being for individuals during the difficult period of returning to religion that includes questioning and inquiry.

²⁸ Köse, *Neden İslam'ı Seçiyorlar*, 126-130.

²⁹ Sevinç, *Hristiyan Olan Türkler ve Türk Misyonerler*; Köse, *Neden İslam'ı Seçiyorlar*, 126-130.

Participants are grateful to their relatives for their positive emotions in the process.

My older sister was very happy. May Allah bless her. I was asking her about whatever I was obsessed and unsure; she gave me quite reasonable answers. I guess nobody else was as happy as my dear sister that I found the right path. May my Lord grant her any reward any good deed and *thawāb* of mine (Participant 11, Male).

Since I have a pious family, I faced no resistance; they welcomed the decision (Participant 12, Male).

“You were a bandit, and now, you are a saint,” mom said. I had no negative reaction from my inner circle (Participant 24, Male).

On the other hand, some participants, particularly females, had severe negative reactions from their inner circles and even parents; they reported being excluded, mocked, or insulted; there were efforts to put them off this decision. Individuals who are isolated by their social circle because of conversion went on to establish new friendships and a new social sphere. As determined by numerous studies on religious conversion, individuals seek a group and environment to embrace them in this new identity.³⁰

I was harshly criticized by my family and inner circle, such as “You are far behind the times,” “Do you think you can deservedly do that?” “Never come to our house.” (Participant 2, Female).

They thought I went mad; they considered me to be a crazy person who went nuts because of excessive questioning. They were always reactive against me (Participant 4, Female).

I was isolated by my parents, my husband, and his family, and most interestingly, by so-called pious persons whom I thought to be happy because I covered my head. Most people did not believe me for years, saying “she just flies adrift; this is a passing fancy.” They thought I would remove my *hijāb* one day (Participant 5, Female).

Since I lived fast, people were very surprised when they learned about my change. As I grew a beard, my mother said: “Are you a fool? You can do this when you are old.” (Participant 14, Male).

³⁰ Köse, *Neden İslam'ı Seçiyorlar*, 126-130; Özyürek, *Being German Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe*.

My friends were shocked when I quit drinking at the age of 27; they could hardly accept the situation and tried to mislead me. They forced me to let loose; indeed, they were why I had gone astray. When I moved away from them, I quit it all (Participant 21, Male).

I wore a loose-fitting dress and large headscarf. I wanted to go anywhere together with my mother, I felt free; but my mother didn't want to come with me. I created a sphere of my own. I had some older neighbors; they went to Friday *şalâh*, and I joined them. ... Relatives of my mom from the Netherlands wanted to marry me to their son, but they gave up, as I was veiled. "If such a microbe is here, you will never recover," they said (Participant 22, Female).

My mother did not talk to me for one year, and my father still doesn't (Participant 27, Female).

According to certain participants, their return to religion was initially welcomed, but negative reactions began to build in the course of time because of relevant changes in line with faith and the desire to spread new ideas; others reported that some changes in their lives were taken positively and some negatively. In particular, women stated that they are isolated by inner circles because of changes in clothing or criticism against the traditional role of women in the wake of conversion. Men, on the other hand, reported their behaviors such as quitting drinking and growing a beard were not taken kindly. In contrast, some participants indicated that they initially received negative reactions from their inner circle due to their own extremism after conversion, but their environment gave a positive response to their eventual better-balanced religious life, and they reached a common ground in the end.

At first, it was not that apparent since it was all about thought; nevertheless, I observed stances against me as I began to tell about it. For example, I asserted that women are special and specific subjects. Nevertheless, my husband objected: "A woman goes to heaven if she obeys her husband, performs *şalâh*, and fasts; you shouldn't go beyond this." (Participant 8, Female).

They got used to this in the course of time; as my extremism diminished over the course of time, this attitude brought along togetherness instead of conflict; there was a kind of moderation. This led to relaxation; a moderate atmosphere was born, and they began to see me through a different perspective (Participant 18, Male).

My wife did not take it kindly when I told her I would grow a beard. Later on, her reaction did not last long. She saw how serious I was; I was trying to practice Islam, I quit drinking, and she was very happy. My family was happy, too. They did not like my beard, however. It was not acceptable for them that I didn't shake hands with my aunt in-law, cousins, and aunts; thereupon, my relatives began to call me fanatical even though I tried to explain my situation ... (Participant 20, Male).

IV. Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

This study analyzes the conversion, (*ibtidā'*, in their own words) of individuals who grew up in Muslim culture but lived (or thought they lived) outside of religion for various reasons during a certain period of their lives to include psychosocial factors that laid the foundation for the process of conversion and their experiences in the wake of conversion.

In terms of family environment, participants often had a nuclear family; two-thirds of interviewees did not respond to questions about their perception of family. Most of the respondents defined their family relations as "affectionate and peaceful." According to relevant studies, crises, unrest, ambiguity of roles, and the lack of a father figure within the family may lead to questioning other opinions and behaviors adopted in the family; consequently, they may be influential on the process of religious conversion.³¹ However, this study did not reveal any such finding. This result can be interpreted in two ways: First, individuals may not want to provide a negative description of the relationship with parents because of present religious satisfaction. This may be an indicator of why most interviewees did not answer the question. Second, since this study exclusively includes individuals who have undergone intrareligious conversion, it can be considered that some factors other than those in interreligious conversion played a more decisive role during intrareligious process.

Most participants state that they had traditional religious education in childhood and assumed their parents were traditionally pious. Generally, participants considered religious education during

³¹ See Köse, *Neden İslam'ı Seçiyorlar*, 63-73; Köse and Ayten, *Din Psikolojisi*, 144-147.

childhood as a form of piety that was based on traditional public belief rather than authentic religion. This statement points to the change experienced by participants; in addition, it may be seen as an effort to make a distinction between their past and present situation and to lay stress on the transformation of identity. Some participants, on the other hand, thought they underwent an oppressive religious education in their family and considered this education as the main reason behind their distant attitude towards religion for a certain period of time. Some others indicated that they were late in internalizing religion because of negative attitudes and misbehaviors of individuals who provided religious education or who allegedly represented religion. Particularly, female participants expressed that they were alienated from religion because of the negative image of women in their culture, which is blended with religious values. For a few participants, the return to religion was actually an encounter and coming together with religious values that he/she never had in the family environment during childhood.

Among the participants, some reported that they had religious and existential inquiries during adolescence, and some were totally indifferent to religion during the same period. In general, however, individuals returned to religion during adolescence or late adolescence/early adulthood. In the literature, adolescence is described as the period of returning to religion; the cases extending to early adulthood are considered as though society grants the individual a delay to adopt social and cultural roles. This phenomenon is called *moratorium* by Erikson.³²

Some participants developed bad habits during adolescence. Smoking, drinking, and drug use were more common among men, although not completely absent among women. Addictive substances such as cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs can be used as a means of coping with difficulties. Such tendencies can be evaluated as a sign of the severity of an identity crisis and as a coping process suffered by individuals during adolescence. Participants reported that they quit such bad habits after deciding on religious conversion. Returning to religion also meant liberation from bad habits and addictions for them. It is understood that participants with such problems definitely quit drinking and drugs and tried to stop smoking. In this context, it is

³² Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994).

possible to assert that the process of returning to religion is preferred by individuals as a method of coping with problems. In addition, certain participants steered towards religion during their process of coping with traumas, and the return to religion was completed with an inquiry about religion. In the literature, the best example of this transformation is the case of Malcolm X.³³

Some participants contemplated a lot in order to clarify their decision of conversion, whereupon the process took years; some others, however, made up their mind upon contemplation for only a few hours. This difference may be associated with the point where individuals start the process of conversion. Indeed, even though returning to religion is primarily based on individual-specific aspects, it is also a long-lasting psychosocial process. Returning to religion often emerges upon maturation of a long-lasting journey that begins in childhood or even infancy, if attachment theory is considered. Participants start their process of religious conversion through various experiences. Dreams, mystic experiences, encounters with good devotees, contact with religious groups, and traumatic experiences are found to influence the religious conversion process. Nonetheless, intellectual motive, which is based on religious inquiry and analysis, comes to the forefront among the participants herein. This fact may be explained by their high levels of education (50% hold bachelor degrees).

During the decision-making stage, the converts underwent significant changes and transformations in life. Participants were asked how these changes affected their lives. Participants often had positive feelings after the decision; conversion provided their lives with order, purpose, and meaning. Apparently, participants rapidly modified their lives pursuant to religious commandments and prohibitions, and they initially began to practice *ṣalāh* in daily life. Males decided to modify their appearance. On the other hand, women opted to wear different clothing after the decision. Modifying their clothes made the conversion process apparent and observable by their social circles. Thus, positive and negative reactions became more explicit. It is found that women were particularly subject to more negative reactions and had difficulties in the process because of their apparel.

³³ Mehmet Atalay, "Malcolm X: Krizlerin Potasında Bir Aksiyoner," in *Araştırma, Değişim ve Din*, ed. H. Kayıklık (Adana: Karahan Kitabevi, 2017), 145-188.

Religious conversion makes one rebuild oneself, since an individual undergoes a multidimensional change and transformation in the process. Pursuant to this process, the individual goes through numerous changes, including, above all, apparel, circle of friends, lifestyle, and social environment. In the present study, participants emphasized that they went through such radical changes; they discovered and adopted religion as a system that organizes their lives and directs their thoughts and behaviors. For the current mood after returning to religion, participants stressed feelings of peace, happiness, and self-confidence, as well as feeling special and free. Negative feelings such as remorse were often expressed within the scope of delaying the conversion process and the years spent in vain. Some participants affirmed this allegedly wasted time, evaluating it as a period that carried them to the true path and that had to be experienced.

In some cases, returning to religion is a preference for which seeds are planted and the foundation is laid in childhood and which is adopted during adolescence and early adulthood in order to find an alternative to materialist and secular society. In this study, participants reported radical changes in the beginning stages. They often steered towards conveying religious message and guidance to others in order to see their transformation in other individuals. Such a tendency had an impact on the social circle of individuals, their family above all. This process became normalized as the individual adopted and internalized the new identity and overcame the fear of reversion.

According to this study, gender is found to be a factor with regard to the time and type of mystic experience and the assessment of the role of sexist discourses on alienation from religion. In this respect, experience during and after religious transformation may be treated in future studies in consideration of gender variables. The impact of acceptance of social gender roles and patriarchal social structure on the religious conversion process may be addressed in different studies. In particular, it is possible to carry out quantitative-qualitative surveys on individuals who grew up in urban versus rural environments in order to identify differences in assessment regarding patriarchal discourses about women. The influence of relationships with parents during childhood on the religious conversion process is demonstrated in this study, as well as in other relevant surveys. The issue may be reconsidered in relation to attachment theory. Presumably, the type of attachment to the essential caretaker is

influential on religious conversion processes. Any such survey, particularly including Muslim examples, will provide the literature with significant contributions. In addition, a natural process of radicalization takes place during religious conversion; individuals may make radical decisions in order to dispose of their former identity and become accustomed to the new one. Studies about the relationship between the abovementioned natural radicalization process and sociological radicalization processes might shed further light on this subject.

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