



Paths to Faith: Religious Conversion among Filipino Expatriates in the UAE

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Abstract: Research on conversion to Islam has largely focused on Western Muslim-minority contexts, where converts often encounter marginalization and contested belonging. This study addresses a significant gap by examining conversion narratives among Filipino Christian expatriates in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a Muslim-majority and multicultural setting where Islam is institutionally embedded in everyday life. Drawing on ten semi-structured interviews with adult Filipino converts, the research employs reflexive thematic analysis to explore motivations, relational influences, and identity negotiations shaping conversion processes. Findings indicate that conversion unfolded as a gradual and multi-layered process in which internal spiritual searching typically preceded social interaction. Digital da'wah platforms emerged as cognitively active yet socially safe spaces for theological exploration. The study identifies the presence of an ambient Islamic infrastructure, including the public call to prayer, Ramadan's transformation of social life, institutional support, and accessible religious education, which structurally facilitates religious encounter within expatriate experience. However, participants also reported experiences of marginalization within Muslim communities, challenging assumptions that conversion in Muslim-majority contexts is inherently less complex. The study contributes to theoretical discussions on religious conversion by highlighting the importance of socioreligious context in shaping contemporary spiritual transformation.

Keywords: Religious conversion, Muslim-majority context, Expatriates, Identity negotiation, Digital da'wah, UAE.

INTRODUCTION

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) presents a distinctive context for the study of religious conversion. As a Gulf state characterized by a majority expatriate population, institutional Islamic authority, and significant cultural diversity, the UAE offers conditions that differ fundamentally from the Western Muslim-minority settings in which most conversion research has been conducted. In this environment, conversion to Islam does not occur at the margins of society but within a religious landscape where Islamic values are publicly visible and socially embedded. The call to prayer structures daily rhythms, Ramadan transforms public space and workplace practices, and institutional da'wah organizations provide structured pathways to Islamic learning through multilingual education and post-conversion support. For Filipino expatriate workers navigating migration-related stress, cultural adjustment, and economic uncertainty, these conditions create a distinctive setting in which religious exploration may unfold differently from patterns documented in Western literature.

Despite the apparent supportiveness of a Muslim-majority environment, conversion remains a complex social and psychological process. Filipino converts in the UAE must

negotiate multiple layers of identity shaped by religion, culture, language, and migration status. Differences in cultural practice, linguistic background, and expectations of religious knowledge may position converts as perceived outsiders within diverse Muslim communities. These dynamics challenge the assumption that conversion in Muslim-majority societies is necessarily smoother or less contested than in minority-faith contexts. Existing theoretical frameworks, largely developed through the study of conversion in secular Western environments, may therefore require adaptation to adequately explain conversion processes in multicultural Muslim-majority settings.

This study examines the conversion narratives of ten Filipino expatriates residing in Dubai in order to understand how religious transformation unfolds within a society where Islam is institutionally dominant yet socially diverse. Using semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis [1,2], the research explores the motivations underlying conversion, the relational and informational influences shaping religious change, and the ways converts negotiate identity following their adoption of Islam. The analysis is primarily guided by Rambo's stage model of conversion [3], considered alongside the Lofland-Stark model [4] and the Lofland-Skonovd typology of conversion motifs [5], with particular attention to how these frameworks operate when applied to Muslim-majority contexts shaped by migration and transnational mobility.

By situating conversion within Dubai's socioreligious environment, this study contributes to the development of more context-sensitive theoretical approaches to religious transformation. The article introduces the concept of ambient Islamic infrastructure to describe the convergence of public religious practice, institutional support, and digital accessibility that structurally embeds religious encounter within everyday expatriate life. At the same time, the study highlights ongoing processes of identity negotiation and intra-community boundary formation that complicate conversion experiences even within supportive religious settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic study of religious conversion spans sociology, psychology, anthropology, and religious studies. Much of this scholarship has focused on Western, secular, or Christian-majority settings, where converts typically join a religious minority and face challenges of marginalization, identity conflict, and discrimination. The literature on Islamic conversion has largely followed this trajectory, portraying converts as cultural outsiders navigating Islamophobia, public suspicion, and contested belonging [6,7]. This framing, while valuable, has left underexplored the realities of conversion in Muslim-majority environments, where the social, institutional, and cultural conditions surrounding Islam are fundamentally different.

Empirical studies in Western contexts illustrate how conversion to Islam is closely linked to the religion's contested public status. Ethnographic research on Muslim converts in the United States demonstrates how conversion processes are shaped by broader sociopolitical dynamics, including media discourse and public perceptions of Islam [8]. Studies examining conversion motifs further suggest that intellectual and experiential pathways play an important role, as many converts engage actively with religious texts, theological questions, and personal reflection before formal commitment [9]. These findings build on established typologies of conversion that distinguish intellectual, experiential,

relational, and affective pathways [5], emphasizing that religious transformation is rarely reducible to a single causal factor.

Beyond Western secular environments, anthropological and gender-focused studies further complicate dominant conversion narratives. Research conducted in non-Western societies demonstrates that Islam may be embraced not as a minority faith but as a moral framework emphasizing discipline, ethical clarity, and communal belonging [10]. Studies focusing on female converts challenge stereotypes portraying women as passive recipients of religious change, instead highlighting agency, autonomy, and conscious identity formation [11]. Together, these perspectives emphasize the importance of context-sensitive analytical frameworks capable of accounting for cultural, geographic, and gendered variation in conversion experiences.

Despite this expanding body of scholarship, relatively limited research has examined conversion in Muslim-majority multicultural environments, particularly among expatriate populations. Although Islam may be institutionally dominant in such contexts, social hierarchies, linguistic diversity, and ethnic boundaries may continue to shape experiences of belonging. Converts may encounter inclusion and exclusion not primarily in relation to non-Muslim majorities, but within diverse Muslim communities characterized by national, cultural, and sectarian differences. These dynamics remain underexplored within existing conversion literature.

Religion plays a significant role in shaping the cultural and social identity of Filipino migrants. The Philippines is widely recognized as the largest Christian nation in Asia, with a strong Roman Catholic majority shaped by historical colonial influences [12]. Among Filipino migrant workers in the Gulf, Catholic identity often remains an important marker of belonging even when religious practice becomes less consistent. Migration exposes many overseas Filipino workers to new religious environments and daily interaction with Muslim communities, creating opportunities for gradual religious engagement [12,13]. Rather than sudden transformation, many conversion experiences reflect progressive engagement with Islamic beliefs through everyday social relationships and cultural exposure [14]. Migration therefore creates a context in which spiritual reflection may become intertwined with experiences of displacement, adaptation, and identity formation.

THEORETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

Classical Models of Religious Conversion

The Lofland-Stark model established that conversion operates primarily through affective bonds and social network integration rather than doctrinal persuasion [4]. Subsequent research has consistently validated interpersonal ties as among the strongest predictors of religious conversion [15,16,17]. However, the explanatory framework of the model is constrained by its empirical origins in the study of marginal religious movements within secular Western societies. Its core assumption—that conversion involves identity transformation through disengagement from mainstream networks and integration into a socially marginal group—presupposes that religious change entails movement toward social deviance. In Muslim-majority contexts such as Dubai, this logic is structurally reversed, as conversion to Islam often involves alignment with the dominant religious environment rather than departure from it. Furthermore, the model’s emphasis on relational mechanisms does

not fully account for contemporary patterns of self-directed intellectual engagement, including private reading, digital learning, and independent theological inquiry. These limitations suggest that while the Lofland-Stark model remains analytically useful for identifying relational influences, it is insufficient as a comprehensive explanatory framework for contexts in which conversion occurs within the prevailing sociocultural order.

Rambo's stage model provides greater analytical flexibility by conceptualizing conversion as an iterative process involving multiple overlapping phases, including context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences [3]. This framework integrates psychological, social, and institutional dimensions of religious change within a single process-oriented model [18]. In the context of Dubai, the macro-level religious environment actively shapes the conversion process by normalizing Islamic practices and embedding opportunities for religious encounter within everyday expatriate life. Public religious practices, institutional educational structures, and digital media environments collectively contribute to what may be described as an enabling religious context [19,20]. Institutional da'wah organizations further support religious learning and post-conversion integration through structured educational programs and mentorship initiatives [21]. While Rambo's model requires contextual adaptation for Muslim-majority settings, it offers a flexible analytical framework for understanding the interaction between individual motivation and sociocultural structure in contemporary conversion experiences.

Motivational Theories: Intrinsic, Extrinsic, and Meaning-Making

Motivational theories address the underlying psychological processes that shape religious conversion. Self-Determination Theory distinguishes between intrinsic motivation, in which individuals pursue religion for its inherent spiritual value, and extrinsic motivation, in which religious affiliation may be influenced by external factors such as social belonging or relational expectations [22]. Research demonstrates that the degree of internalization significantly influences both the durability and psychological outcomes of religious commitment [23,24,25]. Individuals whose religious motivation becomes internalized tend to exhibit stronger identity integration and greater long-term stability in religious belief.

Meaning-making theory complements this perspective by conceptualizing conversion as a process of cognitive restructuring through which individuals reinterpret life experiences in order to restore coherence and existential meaning [26]. Conversion may function as a reorganization of personal belief systems in response to life disruptions or periods of uncertainty [27,18]. Migration contexts may intensify these meaning-making processes, as displacement, cultural adaptation, and social uncertainty create conditions conducive to spiritual reflection. In such circumstances, religion may provide both existential orientation and social belonging, enabling individuals to reconstruct identity in ways that restore coherence and purpose [21,20].

Sociological and Contextual Influences

Gender dynamics represent an important sociological dimension of religious conversion. Structural differences in occupational roles may create distinct opportunities for religious engagement among male and female expatriates. Female domestic workers often encounter Islam through everyday observation of religious practices within Muslim households, while

male migrants may encounter Islam through workplace interactions and intellectual discussions [21]. Studies of conversion patterns suggest that relational influences may be particularly significant in shaping women's conversion pathways, while cognitive and theological engagement may play a more prominent role in male conversion experiences [7,28]. Visible expressions of religious identity, such as dress practices, may also intensify processes of social negotiation and identity reconstruction among female converts.

Institutional religious infrastructure further shapes conversion processes in Muslim-majority societies. Religious educational centers provide structured pathways for learning Islamic beliefs and practices, while digital platforms expand access to religious information beyond physical institutional settings [19,20]. Such institutional accessibility contrasts with the relative marginalization of Islamic learning resources often reported in Western contexts [24,29]. At the same time, converts may continue to navigate tensions between newly adopted religious identities and transnational family relationships in their countries of origin [12,21].

Psychological Influences: Identity, Crisis, and Transformation

Religious conversion may also be understood as a process of psychological transformation involving the reconstruction of personal identity. Converts frequently describe the experience as a rediscovery of coherence, moral clarity, and existential orientation [18,30,31]. Empirical research suggests that religious conversion may contribute to gradual changes in personality development, emotional regulation, and self-perception over time [25].

Experiences of crisis often function as catalysts for religious change. Life disruptions, including migration stress, bereavement, and social isolation, may create cognitive openness toward alternative belief systems [27,32]. Research focusing on migrant populations suggests that displacement and adaptation processes may intensify existential questioning and spiritual exploration [20,21]. However, conversion does not necessarily resolve identity tensions immediately; rather, it often initiates an extended process of identity negotiation as individuals seek to integrate religious commitments with prior cultural practices and social relationships [24]. Institutional support structures, including mentorship programs, religious education classes, and peer networks, may facilitate this process of identity integration and psychological adjustment [19].

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative interpretive research design using reflexive thematic analysis to explore the lived experiences and motivational trajectories of Filipino Christian converts to Islam in Dubai. Reflexive thematic analysis is particularly suitable for examining how individuals construct meaning from personal experiences within socially embedded contexts [1,2]. The method emphasizes the active role of the researcher in interpreting patterns of meaning across narratives while maintaining sensitivity to contextual complexity [2].

The analytical framework was informed by theoretical pluralism, incorporating Self-Determination Theory, Meaning-Making Theory, and sociological models of religious conversion. These perspectives conceptualize motivation and identity as dynamic, socially situated, and continuously negotiated processes [22,26]. The qualitative approach enabled an in-depth examination of participants' internal transformations, relational influences, and contextual experiences within a Muslim-majority environment.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure relevance and diversity of experience. Eligibility criteria required participants to have converted to Islam at age 18 or older and to have maintained their new religious identity for at least six months prior to the interview. Participants were also required to possess sufficient English proficiency to engage in in-depth qualitative interviews.

Initial recruitment was facilitated through the Islamic Information Center in Dubai, an organization providing structured educational and social support for new Muslims. Additional participants were identified through snowball sampling techniques, allowing access to broader community networks [33].

The final sample consisted of ten Filipino expatriates residing in Dubai, including six women and four men. All participants identified as Christian prior to conversion, most commonly as Roman Catholic or Protestant. At the time of interview, all participants had resided in the UAE for more than one year, with time since conversion ranging from eight months to seven years.

Table 1 presents the distribution of participants according to gender and nationality.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

| Category | Number |
|-----------------------|--------|
| Filipino participants | 10 |
| Female | 6 |
| Male | 4 |

Data Collection

Data were collected during a two-month period in 2025 through semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted either in person at the Islamic Information Center or online via Zoom, depending on participant preference and logistical feasibility. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent before being transcribed verbatim.

The semi-structured interview guide was designed to elicit process-oriented narratives across six thematic domains: religious upbringing and early beliefs; motivations for exploring Islam; relational and informational influences; contextual exposure within the UAE Islamic environment; barriers and social responses; and turning points associated with the declaration of faith. This structure allowed consistency across interviews while maintaining flexibility for participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms [34].

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained in accordance with institutional research guidelines. Participants received detailed information regarding the purpose of the study and provided informed consent prior to participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Given the personal nature of religious conversion narratives, particular attention was given to participant well-being and confidentiality. Interviews were conducted in a manner designed to support participant comfort and autonomy [35]. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect identity and ensure confidentiality.

Reflexive consideration was given to researcher positionality and potential power dynamics within the research process [36]. Although the researcher possessed contextual familiarity with Islamic practices and the UAE environment, efforts were made to avoid assumptions of shared understanding and to maintain openness to participants' diverse perspectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents an integrated analysis in which empirical findings and theoretical interpretation are developed together. Findings are organized into six interconnected themes: religious upbringing and early beliefs; initial motivations to explore Islam; key influences on the conversion path; the role of Dubai's Islamic environment; barriers and social reactions; and spiritual affirmation associated with the Shahada. The analysis is guided primarily by Rambo's stage model [3], evaluated alongside Lofland and Stark [4], Lofland and Skonovd [5], and Turner's concept of liminality [37].

Religious Upbringing and Early Beliefs

Participants consistently described being raised within religious households, yet most characterized this early exposure as cultural or routine rather than spiritually internalized. Religious practices were performed out of habit or family expectation, with limited emotional engagement or personal conviction.

"My parents were very Catholic, and we went to church every Sunday, but it was more routine than belief." - Participant 1

This distinction between cultural affiliation and spiritual attachment emerged as a foundational condition shaping later openness to religious change. While religion structured family life, it did not provide satisfactory answers to deeper existential questions. Early doubts – often unarticulated in childhood – resurfaced in adolescence or adulthood as unresolved spiritual tension.

"Even as a child, I used to ask why we do certain things, and no one had answers." - Participant 2

"Church didn't answer the questions I had as a teen." - Participant 3

These findings align with Zebiri's observation [6] that many converts retrospectively describe their prior religious affiliation as socially inherited rather than spiritually chosen,

and with Köse's finding [36] that dissatisfaction with early religious socialization frequently preceded later exploration. Within Rambo's framework [3], this corresponds to the 'Context' stage, in which family, culture, and early belief systems shape the conditions under which individuals become receptive to religious transformation. What is notable here is that the context in question was not one of religious absence but of religious insufficiency – participants were not secular prior to conversion but rather spiritually under-served by traditions they experienced as inherited rather than chosen.

Importantly, several participants emphasized that their upbringing nonetheless instilled moral and ethical values – honesty, compassion, discipline – which they later perceived as reaffirmed within Islam.

"I grew up with strong values, which I later saw reflected in Islam too." - Participant 4

Rather than representing a rejection of prior moral frameworks, conversion was framed as a reorientation or completion of values already present but previously lacking spiritual coherence. This finding complicates reductive narratives that cast conversion as wholesale identity replacement; for these participants, Islam did not displace prior moral formation but provided the theological architecture within which existing values acquired deeper meaning.

Initial Motivations to Explore Islam

Across the sample, participants traced their earliest interest in Islam to an internal sense of spiritual incompleteness rather than any external catalyst. This was not described as a dramatic rupture with prior beliefs, but as a quiet, accumulating awareness that their existing religious frameworks no longer provided adequate answers to fundamental questions about purpose, mortality, and divine nature.

"It was an emptiness I couldn't explain, like a hole in my life." - Participant 1

"I just felt like I was missing something." - Participant 3

"I started questioning everything—life, purpose, what comes after." - Participant 4

What distinguishes these accounts from conventional crisis narratives is their gradualism. In Rambo's model [3], the 'Crisis' stage is often associated with acute disruption—bereavement, trauma, or social upheaval. Here, however, crisis manifested as a slow erosion of spiritual certainty, closer to what Rambo describes as the 'Quest' stage, where individuals actively seek alternative meaning systems without necessarily experiencing external distress. This finding is consistent with van Nieuwkerk's argument [7] that conversion to Islam is more often driven by a desire for coherence than by antagonism toward one's inherited tradition. Participants expressed no hostility toward Christianity; rather, they described outgrowing a framework that felt inherited rather than chosen.

When participants began to encounter Islamic teachings, they were drawn not to Islam as a counter-identity but to its capacity to resolve the ambiguity they had been carrying. Monotheistic clarity, the integration of worship into daily routine, and the perceived rationality of Islamic theology were cited as sources of both intellectual satisfaction and emotional relief.

"The idea of one God, the discipline of praying—it felt right to me." - Participant 7

"There was purpose in everything. Nothing felt random." - Participant 6

These responses correspond to what Lofland and Skonovd classify as 'intellectual' and 'mystical' conversion motifs [5]—pathways initiated through private cognitive engagement and inner conviction rather than social recruitment. Crucially, most participants indicated that this reflective process was already well underway before they had any sustained contact with practicing Muslims, suggesting that the internal readiness for religious change preceded and conditioned the social encounters that would later shape it.

Key Influences on the Conversion Path

While internal searching initiated the conversion trajectory, it was the convergence of relational exposure and informational access that gave it direction and momentum. Participants consistently identified two external factors as decisive: observing Islam through the conduct of Muslim acquaintances, and engaging with Islamic content through books, lectures, and digital platforms.

The relational dimension was characterized not by persuasion but by proximity. Participants described Muslim friends, colleagues, and partners whose daily behavior—generosity, patience, consistency between stated values and lived conduct—provoked curiosity organically, without any explicit invitation to consider Islam.

"My friend never pushed me, but seeing how she lived made me curious." - Part 2

"It wasn't what they said, it was how they were." - Part 4

Similarly, participants described observing Muslim practices in everyday settings such as workplaces and homes, where exposure to prayer routines and disciplined lifestyles stimulated interest in understanding Islam more deeply.

"My sponsor, they pray five times a day, I wanted to become like them." - Interview 9

"My colleagues are mostly Muslims, I always see how they pray." - Interview 10

These encounters created opportunities for experiential learning, where Islam was encountered as a lived practice rather than as an abstract doctrine. Observing consistency between belief and behaviour appeared to strengthen participants' perception of Islam as authentic and meaningful.

This finding reinforces what Köse identified as the primacy of affective bonds in conversion [36]: individuals are drawn toward a faith not through doctrinal argumentation but through witnessing its embodiment in trusted relationships. Van Nieuwkerk similarly notes that familiarity and relational safety lower the psychological threshold for religious exploration [7]. Within Rambo's framework [3], these encounters constitute the 'Encounter' stage—the point at which a seeker's generalized spiritual openness meets a specific religious tradition, typically mediated through personal relationships rather than institutional outreach.

Alongside these interpersonal influences, self-directed engagement with Islamic content played an equally significant role. Participants turned to books, YouTube lectures,

podcasts, and social media as private spaces for theological inquiry—environments where they could investigate Islam without social exposure or commitment.

"I started watching lectures online and everything just clicked." - Participant 10

Participants described reading introductory texts on Islamic beliefs, listening to recorded lectures, and attending classes offered through Islamic educational institutions. These resources allowed participants to explore Islam independently and gradually develop theological understanding.

"I got three books... biography, pillars of Islam... I kept reading and reading." - Participant 10

"they gave me pamphlets... sometimes I read." - Participant 9

Islamic centres were frequently described as structured spaces that facilitated this learning process, providing accessible explanations of Islamic teachings and opportunities to ask questions in a supportive environment.

"they sent me to the Islamic center... they taught us how to pray." - Participant 9

For participants navigating the personal implications of religious change, private learning environments offered an intermediate stage between curiosity and commitment. These settings enabled individuals to explore Islamic teachings cognitively before expressing their interest publicly.

The significance of these informational pathways aligns with Bunt's concept of cyber-Islamic environments [38], in which online platforms function as autonomous spaces for religious learning, identity exploration, and gradual affiliation. Digital resources and educational institutions thus operated as cognitively active yet socially protected contexts in which participants could evaluate Islamic teachings at their own pace.

What emerges from these accounts is a pattern of layered influence: internal questioning created receptivity, relational observation provided a living model, and digital resources supplied the theological substance needed to move from curiosity toward conviction. No single factor was sufficient in isolation; rather, conversion took shape through the cumulative interaction of personal readiness, social trust, and informational access over time.

The Role of Dubai's Islamic Environment

While participants emphasized that their initial interest in Islam emerged from internal spiritual searching, the broader socioreligious context of Dubai played a significant role in facilitating and sustaining their exploration. Unlike Western settings where Islam often exists at the margins of public life, Dubai's urban environment is structured around Islamic visibility—a contextual feature that participants described as influential in normalizing their curiosity and enabling their journey.

Several participants noted that the call to prayer, heard five times daily across the city, served as a recurring prompt for spiritual reflection. Rather than experiencing Islam as distant or unfamiliar, they encountered it as a consistent presence woven into daily life.

“Even before I became Muslim, I used to pause when I heard the adhan. It was beautiful, calming—it made me feel something.” - Participant 2

“I’d be walking in the mall or on the street and suddenly hear the prayer call. It always reminded me that there’s something bigger going on.” - Participant 3

The public observance of Ramadan emerged as particularly significant. Participants described how the transformation of public space during the holy month—altered work schedules, communal iftar gatherings, and the visible discipline of fasting colleagues—sparked curiosity and created natural opportunities for conversation about Islamic beliefs and practices.

“During Ramadan, I saw my colleagues fasting, praying, and sharing food. It wasn’t something hidden—it was all around me.” - Participant 6

“Everything changed in Ramadan, even the way people treated each other. It made me ask, ‘What is this religion that makes people act like that?’” - Participant 7

Importantly, participants noted that Dubai’s environment made Islam feel accessible rather than foreign. The availability of Islamic educational resources—including multilingual classes, digital platforms, and institutions such as the Islamic Information Center—reduced barriers to exploration.

“There are so many free classes here. You can just walk in, sit down, and learn about Islam in English or your own language.” - Participant 4

“If I was back home, I wouldn’t even know where to go. But in Dubai, it’s like Islam is open and welcoming everywhere.” - Participant 8

These findings underscore the theoretical significance of Rambo's "Context" stage within Muslim-majority settings [3]. In Dubai, the macro-level religious environment does not merely provide background conditions for conversion; it actively shapes the conversion pathway by normalizing Islamic practice, reducing social risk associated with religious exploration, and embedding encounter opportunities within everyday expatriate experience.

Participants did not need to seek out Islam through deliberate effort—rather, the faith was continuously present, visible, and institutionally supported, creating what might be termed an ambient invitation to explore.

This contextual dynamic distinguishes conversion in Dubai from patterns documented in Western literature, where converts often describe actively searching for Islam despite social obstacles, limited resources, and cultural unfamiliarity [36,7]. In Dubai, the socioreligious infrastructure lowers the threshold for exploration, enabling spiritual curiosity to develop into sustained engagement with relative ease.

Barriers and Social Reactions

As participants moved from private exploration toward outward religious identification, conversion ceased to be a purely internal process and became a site of social negotiation. The transition from belief to visibility introduced a series of emotional and relational barriers that did not subside after formal commitment — in many cases, they intensified.

The most immediate challenge was disclosure. Participants described prolonged periods of concealment, driven not by uncertainty about their faith but by anticipation of how others would respond.

"I didn't tell anyone at first. I was scared what my parents would think." - Participant 7

"I thought I would be seen as extreme." - Participant 2

"People at work wouldn't understand. I kept it to myself for a long time." - Participant 3

What these accounts reveal is not ambivalence about Islam but a calculated awareness of social cost. Participants anticipated relational loss, professional discomfort, and reputational damage – concerns rooted in broader societal discourses that frame Islam as radical or incompatible with Western values. Within Rambo's framework [3], this phase corresponds to the 'Interaction' and 'Commitment' stages, where the convert must renegotiate existing relationships while absorbing the social consequences of religious realignment. However, what Rambo's model does not fully capture is the directionality of these pressures: for expatriates in Dubai, the tension arose primarily from transnational family networks and homeland social expectations rather than from the immediate local environment, which was broadly supportive of Islam. This complicates the assumption, embedded in Western-oriented conversion models, that social resistance originates from the convert's proximate community.

Van Nieuwkerk documents a similar pattern among Western converts, observing that many experience a prolonged sense of suspension between identities – lacking full belonging in both their former and newly adopted social worlds [7]. Turner's concept of liminality provides a useful lens for understanding this transitional condition [37]: participants occupied an ambiguous social position in which identity was unsettled, prior categories of belonging had dissolved, and new ones had not yet solidified. During this phase, social validation became particularly salient.

"My family didn't really know what to do with me. They kept asking, 'Why?'" - Participant 3

"I just stopped bringing it up because every time I did, I felt like I was being interrogated." - Participant 8

A particularly significant finding is that barriers to belonging did not arise exclusively from non-Muslim networks. Several participants described encountering judgment, marginalization, or dismissal within Muslim communities themselves – particularly when they did not conform to expected cultural norms, speak Arabic, or demonstrate assumed levels of religious knowledge.

"People assumed I didn't know anything, or they ignored me altogether." - Participant 5

"I felt like I had to prove myself constantly – like I wasn't Muslim enough." - Participant 7

These experiences resonate with Zebiri's finding [6] that converts are frequently positioned as perpetually novice or culturally inauthentic within established Muslim

communities. Köse similarly notes that recognition and legitimacy remain ongoing challenges for converts who do not share the ethnic, linguistic, or cultural backgrounds of their coreligionists [36]. In Dubai's highly diverse Muslim landscape – where national, sectarian, and linguistic boundaries are pronounced – these dynamics take on particular salience. Converts navigated not a single community but a fragmented social terrain in which belonging had to be negotiated repeatedly across multiple Muslim subgroups.

These findings underscore that conversion is not solely an inward spiritual transformation but a socially negotiated process involving emotional risk, identity renegotiation, and ongoing navigation of belonging across multiple and sometimes competing social contexts. Yet despite these tensions, participants consistently described reaching a point of spiritual certainty that outweighed external resistance – a threshold that found its most powerful expression in the declaration of the Shahada.

Spiritual Affirmation and Turning Point

If the preceding theme illustrates conversion as a process of social negotiation and contested belonging, the Shahada represents the moment at which internal conviction achieved definitive expression. For every participant, declaring the Islamic testimony of faith was described as the emotional and symbolic culmination of their journey – the point at which intellectual understanding, spiritual longing, and emotional readiness converged into a single act of commitment.

"As soon as I said the Shahada, I felt a deep sense of peace." - Participant 5

"Everything aligned in that moment." - Participant 3

"It felt like all my searching had led me there." - Participant 2

Within Rambo's framework [3], this corresponds to the 'Commitment' stage – the phase in which an individual formally embraces a new belief system following prolonged exploration and evaluation. Yet what participants described exceeded doctrinal affirmation. The Shahada functioned as a moment of psychological resolution, bringing closure to months or years of searching, doubt, and liminal uncertainty. It was not the beginning of belief – belief had been forming incrementally throughout the process – but its consolidation into a definitive personal declaration.

The emotional intensity of this moment was striking across the sample. Participants described tears, profound calm, and an overwhelming sense of relief – affective responses that suggest the Shahada operates not merely as a ritual formality but as a threshold experience in which accumulated spiritual tension finds release.

"I cried. It felt like everything finally made sense." - Participant 1

"It was like my heart finally settled." - Participant 2

Notably, several participants performed the Shahada privately or in intimate settings rather than in a mosque or institutional context, underscoring that the declaration's primary significance was personal rather than communal.

"I said it on my own, in my room. But I knew God was watching." - Participant 6

This pattern carries theoretical implications. Lofland and Skonovd characterize conversion culminations as symbolic validations of a longer process rather than abrupt transformations [5], and Köse similarly frames the Shahada as a deeply personal turning point marking internal acceptance rather than public affiliation [36]. The private performance of the Shahada by several participants reinforces these readings: the act drew its meaning from the individual's relationship with God rather than from communal witness or institutional certification.

From an anthropological perspective, Turner's (1969) concept of aggregation – the final phase of a rite of passage, in which the individual assumes a new identity and is reintegrated into a revised social and moral order – offers a useful interpretive frame. The Shahada marked not only entry into Islam but an existential reconciliation: participants described a newfound coherence between belief, identity, and purpose that had been absent throughout the preceding stages of searching and liminality.

"After that, I didn't care what others thought. I knew what I believed." - Participant 8

This moment of affirmation did not eliminate the challenges of post-conversion life – the negotiations of belonging, family tension, and intra-community marginalization documented in the preceding section persisted. What it provided, however, was an enduring spiritual foundation: a settled sense of conviction from which participants could navigate the ongoing complexities of life as new Muslims in a cosmopolitan, multicultural, and deeply stratified religious environment.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the sociology and psychology of religion by examining conversion to Islam among Filipino expatriates in a Muslim-majority context – a setting largely absent from existing scholarship. By situating conversion within Dubai's socioreligious landscape, the findings expose significant limitations in dominant theoretical frameworks while offering empirical grounding for more context-sensitive approaches to understanding religious transformation.

The Lofland-Stark model [4], despite its foundational status in conversion research, proves inadequate for explaining conversion in this context. Developed through observation of a marginal millenarian movement in a secular American setting, the model presupposes that conversion operates primarily through progressive encapsulation within a deviant or stigmatized group, whereby the convert gradually disengages from prior social networks while being absorbed into a new, socially marginal community.

In Dubai, this logic is fundamentally inverted. Conversion to Islam does not entail entry into a stigmatized minority but alignment with a state-supported, publicly visible majority faith. Participants did not experience social encapsulation. The model's assumption that conversion requires detachment from mainstream society renders it poorly suited to contexts where Islam is the mainstream. Furthermore, Lofland-Stark's emphasis on affective bonds as the primary mechanism of conversion, while partially supported by participants' accounts of relational influence, fails to account for the significant role of self-directed intellectual engagement and independent religious learning that preceded and often operated alongside interpersonal contact.

Lofland and Skonovd's typology of conversion motifs [5] offers greater flexibility in categorizing individual pathways, and participants' experiences did correspond particularly to intellectual and experiential motifs. However, the typology remains descriptive rather than explanatory – it classifies the character of conversion but does not illuminate how contextual, relational, and psychological factors interact dynamically across time to produce religious change. As a static taxonomy, it cannot capture the processual, layered nature of conversion that emerged clearly in participants' narratives, where intellectual curiosity, relational exposure, independent learning, and emotional affirmation operated not as discrete motifs but as overlapping, mutually reinforcing dimensions of a single unfolding trajectory.

By contrast, Rambo's stage model [3] demonstrates considerably greater analytical utility for understanding conversion in this context. Its conceptualization of conversion as iterative movement through overlapping phases – Context, Crisis, Quest, Encounter, Interaction, Commitment, and Consequences – accommodates the non-linear, gradual pathways described by participants far more effectively than either the Lofland-Stark model or typological approaches. Crucially, Rambo's foregrounding of 'Context' as a distinct analytical stage proves indispensable in Dubai, where the macro-level religious environment does not merely provide background conditions for conversion but actively shapes the conversion pathway itself.

In what may be described as an ambient Islamic infrastructure – characterized by the public call to prayer, Ramadan's transformation of public life, institutional da'wah organizations, and accessible multilingual education – the 'Encounter' stage often occurs through everyday exposure to Islamic practices embedded within daily routines. Rather than requiring deliberate search, encounter with Islam becomes structurally present within the lived environment of expatriate workers, lowering the threshold for religious exploration in ways that Western-derived models neither anticipate nor fully explain.

That said, even Rambo's model requires contextual refinement. Its stages, while flexible, were developed primarily with reference to Western contexts where conversion involves navigating social resistance, limited institutional support, and minority-faith status. In Dubai, the 'Crisis' stage did not always involve dramatic life disruption; participants more frequently described a gradual sense of spiritual dissatisfaction or unanswered theological questions rather than acute personal crisis.

Similarly, the 'Interaction' and 'Commitment' stages involve ongoing processes of learning and identity development, as participants gradually integrate religious practices into their daily lives. These findings suggest that conversion scholarship may benefit from greater attention to the continuity between pre-conversion questioning and post-conversion identity formation, particularly in contexts where religious learning continues beyond the moment of formal commitment.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample was relatively small (n = 10) and purposively selected, limiting generalizability. As all participants were Filipino expatriates, the findings reflect a specific migrant context and may not fully represent conversion pathways among other national or cultural groups in the UAE. All interviews were conducted

in English, a second language for most participants, which may have constrained narrative depth when articulating complex emotions or theological reflections. The researcher's positionality as a fellow Muslim expatriate may have influenced participant responses, although reflexivity and peer debriefing were employed to mitigate this.

Additionally, the researchers' institutional affiliation with the Islamic Information Center, through which several participants were recruited, introduces the possibility of social desirability bias. Participants aware of this connection may have presented their conversion experiences in a more coherent or affirmative manner than they would have in a fully independent research setting. To mitigate this, participants were explicitly informed that the study was conducted independently of any institutional evaluation, that their responses would be anonymized, and that they were encouraged to share their experiences candidly, including ambivalent or challenging aspects of their journeys. Nevertheless, the potential influence of perceived institutional proximity on participant disclosure cannot be entirely excluded and should be considered when interpreting the findings.

By design, this study focused specifically on pathways leading to conversion – the motivations, influences, and processes through which individuals came to embrace Islam – rather than examining longer-term post-conversion outcomes. Future research may extend this inquiry by exploring post-conversion integration, examining how new Muslims navigate identity development, religious learning, community belonging, and relationships with family members across national contexts. Such research may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of religious transformation across the full arc of the convert experience, while further refining theoretical models that remain strongly shaped by Western minority-faith assumptions.

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