

## Rational factors in the spiritual journey of embracing Islam

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### ABSTRACT

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The studies on conversion to Islam in multi-faiths and multi-nations show that there are many pushed and pulled factors of religious shift either as rational factors or relational ones. The rational factors which is induced by intellectual search for embracing Islam as alternative live has become a focal point of discussion in this paper. Analyzing rational factors from various experiences of new Muslims in multi-nations' biographical narratives will significantly clarify the misperceptions that marriage is the main factor of becoming Muslim. This paper highlights the key themes of Islam which are believed to be the rational factors by those individuals to embrace Islam. The study on the rational factors of embracing Islam is carried out by examining the secondary and primary data of new Muslim's biographical narratives. Embracing Islam through the means of rational factors is induced by two contributing elements; intellectual connection to Islam and guide of life. It is to say that, behind the spiritual tradition of Islam, there is the rationality that clarify the content of Islamic teachings which bring about the potential convert to think deeper on making a choice for a new alternative way of life to embrace Islam. This intellectual conversion has helped much on the new Muslim to face the challenge for being a practicing Muslim as the religious choice is rational.

#### Keywords:

Conversion, New Muslim, Rational factor, Biographical narratives, Religious choice

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## 1. Introduction

The spiritual tradition of Islam plays an important role to be the main point of entry to Islam. It is particularly important in the history of dissemination of Islam in the West. Islam offers the spiritual remedy for the modernization and secularization which cause to the problem of material attitudes, loss of the real meaning of life combined with spiritual poverty. This situation leads some individuals to seek for a religion which they believe can give them an alternative way of life. Therefore, conversion to other religion particularly Islam has been seen as a process of fulfilling the

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spiritual search for those in need of a new guidance and direction of life. Studies on conversion to Islam among multi-faiths and multi-nations show that there are many contributing factors to this conversion of faith, be they rational or relational factors [1-5]. The rational factors that are induced by the intellectual search for choosing Islam as a way of life is the focal point of this paper. Analysing these rational factors from various experiences of new Muslims in multi-nations biographical narratives will significantly clarify the misperception that marriage is the main factor of becoming a Muslim. Many studies show that embracing Islam is closely related to get marriage with the Muslim spouse not only because of abiding to the law of inter-marriage in certain country but also affectionately attracted to the religion of Muslim spouse. A study by author [6], showed that a large number of Chinese in Malaysia converted to facilitate intermarriages with Muslims. The same argument stated by author [7] that mixed-marriages of converts that leads to the conversion into Islam are quite frequent in Malaysia. It is almost similar in Western context that a large numbers of Western women who convert to Islam on account of personal relationships such as marriage to Muslim men [8].

However, the factor of conversion can be varied depend on how the potential convert perceive and become interested in Islam as a new religion. There are those individuals who choose Islam because of the rational factors that they have critically studied some Islamic teachings and observed the Muslim lifestyle as they believe those elements able to fulfil their spiritual needs. This paper is based on the functional approach, looking at what conversion means in the context of a person's life. It is more theological in the discussion rather than sociological in its analysis on the issue how the key themes of Islamic principles from the life story of converts have contributed to the process of religious conversion to Islam. The key themes of Islam are divided into two; intellectual connection to Islam (intellectual issues of previous religion and Quranic scientific arguments) and Islam as a guidance for life (Muslim lifestyle and family bond relationship). The study shows that Islam is not only an interesting approach to life, but also an acceptable, and, for some, an irresistible way of life. The study on the rational factors of conversion to Islam has been carried out by examining the secondary and primary data of new Muslim's biographical narratives. The findings show that conversion through means of rational factors is considered more Islamic due to its main goal of searching for the truth. This process of searching leads the new Muslim to find that certain Islamic principles are appealing to fulfil their spiritual void and encourage themselves to become a practicing Muslim.

## **2. Embracing Islam as a process of religious conversion**

There are many definitions and understandings of religious conversion, which vary according to the standpoint of the scholar or person formulating the definition. 'Insiders' tend to describe their own conversion in very positive terms, with reference to the transcendent, as a process of spiritual awakening in which they felt they were being guided by God. 'Outsiders', on the other hand, tend to be more interested in the psychological, social, cultural and other forces which may have influenced the process [5]. Author [3] argues that conversion is an expression of personal religious preference has much wider impact and meaning. It is always a confrontation between two religions; 'the receiving and the deserted religion'. It is therefore, the process of religious conversion into Islam stimulates different meaning of the concept and different interpretation in understanding why those individuals tend to choose Islam despite its misconception and the challenge for being lifelong Muslim.

The concept of conversion is primarily a Jewish and Christian term. Definition of conversion abound within Judaism and Christianity indicates a radical call to reject evil and to embrace a

relationship with God through faith. Some scholars in the human sciences limit the process of conversion to radical alterations in people's beliefs, behaviours and affiliations. Conversion is also considered as a dynamic multifaceted process of changes. For some, the changes will be abrupt and radical. For others, it is gradual and not inclusive of the total changes of a person's total life [7].

In Islamic perspective, author [8] argues that there is no such word as conversion in the Arabic language; rather, the emphasis is on the idea of becoming a Muslim that is, "submitting" to God in the form prescribed by his final revelation. Hence, to understand conversion to Islam requires an understanding of the word "Islam" itself. Islam denotes an act of submission and envisages not only "the acceptance of the outward forms of any one particular prophets' practice, not even that of the seal of the prophets, Muhammad. Rather, the word represents that pure worship of, and obedience to, the Divine that is exemplified in the lives of all those prophets, from Noah, through Abraham, Moses and Jesus, to the seal of the prophets Muhamad. Hence, to accept Islam is in reality "to take on the ancient, Abrahamic, way of worship, given the specific detailed requirements reflected in the outward practice of the seal of the prophets, Muhamad. Jawad further clarifies that those who embrace Islam often refer to themselves as "reverts" rather than converts. The idea of convert as "revert" implies returning to their original nature and helps explain why converts tend to see their identity not as socially and culturally constructed, but as grounded in their original and natural being as a Muslim. It is also because Islam believe that each new child is born as a creation of Allah and with an innate belief in One God. It is their parents and societies that make people choose a faith other than Islam. Thus, when an individual accepts Islam, they are not converting from one religion to another but returning to the original and true revelation of Allah. That being so, those who adopt Islam are said not to convert, but to revert to their natural and true disposition.

Embracing Islam entails public acceptance of the declaration of faith in front of at least two witnesses, this being the first pillar of Islam. Once this is publicly stated, it is assumed that the "new Muslim" would live according to Islamic rules and regulation dictated by God and the Prophet Muhammad. This involves the performance of the ritual prayer five times a day, payment of the annual alms-tax of zakat, fasting the month of Ramadan and performing the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime [9]. Becoming a Muslim means that a person is ready to choose Islam as an alternative way of life. This will take the new Muslim gaining an experience which is not similar as those who chooses other religion as his/her alternative life. The difference can be traced out when the challenge of choosing Islam is slightly heavier than choosing other religion. It is because those people who have embraced to Islam will experience the situations in which they fell out of the dominant order. They experienced stigmatization, failure or disintegration within their own context and they articulate these experiences with reference to a "foreign" religion. In certain case, conversion to Islam may evoke a range of sensitive issues as it crossing religious and ethnic boundaries which generally engender hostility [3].

The instance of the situation can be seen in religious conversion in Malaysia. Author [7] argues that one of the stereotyping of someone embracing Islam is "*masuk Melayu*" (becoming Malay). In Chinese, it is known as "*jip Huan*" or becoming a Malay. In the Chinese Hokkien dialect, it means as entering the ways of an uncivilized race. Islam is synonymous to being Malay. Thus, embracing Islam would mean entering the "Malay way", even though Islam is a universal religion. When a convert expresses the two testimonies of witness (*kalimatayn*) and becomes a Muslim, they are usually branded as entering the "Malayhood". Then, a convert goes for circumcision and stops taking pork. Then, to the non-Muslims, these are proof of entering "Malayhood" as these are also distinctive identities of Malays. The situation becomes more critical when the converts undergo the situation for being double marginality [5]. On the basis of society, a new convert always feels that

he is a marginalized man as he could not fit into the society of his own community of the previous religion and he also cannot be easily integrated into the new Malay community. His religion is no longer with his own previous ethnic group and he has become only a new member in the Islamic ummah [7].

It shows that the Muslim converts face the problem of integrating certain cultural values with an Islamic identity, and this leads to a new identity as Chinese Muslim, British Muslim and European Muslim. It is to say that embracing Islam involves changes in certain belief system and require the formation of change in new identity to fit the society he/she lives in. Although the requirement of changes in the belief system and social conduct seem to be an obstacle for the converts, this does not keep themselves from making decision for choosing Islam since it offers a message of rationality to fulfil their spiritual needs. Studying the message of rationality in Islam will lead us to understand that there are some converts who have chosen Islam because of the intellectual factor as they gain knowledge of Islam after studying some literature and observing the lifestyle of practicing Muslim. This intellectual search become the pull factor of rationality to embrace Islam which deny the fact that the converts choose Islam only because of the intention of getting married with the Muslim spouse or have been influenced by any other factors. The message of rationality in Islam can be understood by initially discuss the spiritual journey towards embracing Islam as the main motive of religious conversion.

### **3. Spiritual journey towards embracing Islam**

A spiritual journey is a process when a seeker search for the truth that he/she thinks can be his/her alternative guidance of life. The seeker or the convert usually impressed by the inner peace, serenity and strength of belief they witness in other believers. Author [8] argues that the spirituality in Islam usually refers to Sufism is the main point of entry to Islam for British people, particularly the elites. Sufism is also a central link between the spiritual traditions of Islam and the West. If one wishes to appreciate the deeper motives for conversion to Islam, one cannot afford to ignore this inner aspect of religion. The following quotation illustrates this well, "I knew that I earned for more spiritual fulfilment in my life. But, as yet, nothing had seemed acceptable or accessible to me. I had been brought up essentially a secular humanist. Morals were emphasized, but never attributed to any spiritual or divine being. As I met more Muslims, I was struck not only by inner peace, but by the strength of their faith. In retrospect, I realize that I was attracted to these peaceful souls because I sensed my own lack of inner peace and conviction". Author [9] states that some of the women converts who have related their stories are "serial converts", those who have set out on a spiritual journey, studied numerous religious traditions, converted to a variety of faiths before looking into Islam. Their encounter with Islam was often described as a part of their ongoing spiritual journey.

Study shows that the spiritual tradition of Islam is the contributing element of conversion to Islam among the West and still remain the main factor of conversion to Islam until now. Author [8] points out that it is interesting to highlight on the recent phenomenon of conversion in the West, a large number of white people have become Muslim compared to the past, dominant group of those who embraced Islam was of either African-Caribbean or African-American origin. In Britain, some of them come from affluent backgrounds, such as Ahmed-Dobson, the son of former cabinet minister, Frank Dobson; Mathew Wilkinson, a former headboy of Eton; Nicholas Brandt, the son of an investment Banker; Jonathan Birt, the son of the former director-general of the BBC, John Birt; the son and daughter of Lord Justice Scott, who investigated the wars-to-Iraq deal; Emma Clark, the great-grand daughter of the former Liberal prime minister, Herbert Asquith; and very recently,

Lauren Booth, the sister-in-law of the former prime minister, Tony Blair. Author [9] further argues that the numbers may not be significant, but the fact that most of those who have converted to Islam as mentioned above come from middle class background. It reveals the fact that despite the extremely negative image of Islam in the West and the consequent tensions and difficulties generated by conversion to Islam, this religion is still a choice of alternative life for those who seek for the spiritual fulfilment.

The process towards the spiritual journey can be described through the experience of reading Quran. As author [5] argues that a commonly occurring motif in Muslim conversion accounts is the impact of reading Quran where convert often speak this in spiritual and not just cognitive terms, expressing a sense that the Qur'an was speaking to them directly, and that they were overcome by a conviction that it really was the word of God. The search for meaning and purpose is often prominent in these narratives. As the interviewees report that the cognitive element was prominent, with thirteen people mentioning reading (including reading the Qur'an). One of the interviewees said that when she was reading books on Islam, "everything clicked into place, my brain accepted, I and my heart accepted it." Another interviewee said that on reading the Qur'an, "I just knew from the first few verses that it was the truth." Author [2]) states that the convert reports, "The Quran is like a guide to help you; when you read it, it makes you feel better." For others, it was the attainment of a spiritual awakening."

The above discussion shows that the spiritual journey towards embracing Islam is cultivated by various experiences of understanding the basic tenets of Islam. Normally, the process towards the spiritual journey begin when they encounter Muslim as friends, classmates, boyfriends, spouses, acquaintances and neighbours which lead them to get curious and investigate more about Islam. The process to quest for the knowledge become increasing when they witness and observe the different lifestyles of the Muslim which is more attractive than what they have used to practice every day. They feel this new experience has given them the spiritual fulfilment from the knowledge that they gain from the new process of learning the new religion. The process towards the spiritual journey keep on going when they finally find that there are rational elements from the new teaching of religion that can satisfy their spiritual needs. It is to say that, behind the spiritual tradition of Islam, there is the rationality that clarify the content of Islamic teachings which bring about the potential convert to think deeper on making a choice for a new alternative way of life to embrace Islam.

#### **4. Rational factors in the spiritual journey of embracing Islam**

As discuss before, the spiritual tradition of Islam is considered part of the main contributing factors the converts entered into the fold of Islam. Some accepted it after studying it for a long time and some other were attracted as a result of the positive examples of Muslims. Nevertheless, there are some converts entered to Islam in order to be able to marry a Muslim [1]. In different point of view, author [4] develops a useful typology of conversion to Islam. He distinguishes relational from rational conversions. Relational factors of conversion are those who have went through the discovery of Islam by meeting Muslim believers, while as a tourist or on a business trip to Muslim countries or by falling in love with him or her. Relational conversions are subdivided into instrumental and non-instrumental forms. Non-instrumental relational conversions are induced by relationships with Muslims either by way of marriage, family, meeting immigrants or travelling. Instrumental conversions are usually related to marriage with Muslims.

The rational conversions in contrast, are not induced by personal contacts but rather by an intellectual search. The intellectual mode of conversion implies that the individual becomes

acquainted with alternative ideologies and ways of life by Muslim individual, private investigation like reading books and other impersonal ways [1]. In the intellectual mode, the individual is still likely to be 'socially involved' with members of the new religion. However, there is little or no external social pressure and a reasonably high level of belief is attained prior to actual conversion. For author [4], the intellectual conversion is the process of searching religion based on reading the Qur'an, have become acquainted with Islam through books on Islamic mysticism, especially Sufism, which have attracted a wide Western readership. Author [9] highlights several testimonials from the converts that they have been "captured by the Quran", which they describe reading the text recount an emotional response and having been impressed by the scientific aspect of the Quran. They believe that Quran is a text with an intellectual appeal, logical and easy to read and understand. "I was amazed at the scientific knowledge in the Qur'an, I was getting my degree in microbiology at that time, and was particularly impressed with the description of the embryological process, and so much more." As another convert put it, "The Qur'an speaks of embryonic development, cloud formation and other recent scientific knowledge. It made sense."

The other instance of conversion as it appeals to the Quran can be traced on the biographical story of Murad Wilfred Hofmann [8]. Hoffmann stresses that he felt intellectually and emotionally attracted to Islam and part of that is the message of the Quran. Hoffman was neither an atheist nor an agnostic but a religiously inclined person believing that there was not enough proof to deny the existence of God. He also considered that the acceptance of God is logical for the individual person. He felt uneasy with the concepts of the original sin, the divinity of Jesus, incarnation, sacrificial death and the Trinity and started to seek answers elsewhere. He described how the illumination came when he read verse 38 of chapter 53 of the Quran, which states that, "no bearer of burdens shall bear the burden of another." For him, this verse rejects the concept of original sin, the idolization of saints, church hierarchies and the role of sacrament. In time, he began to see Islam as the pristine religion, based on the belief in the oneness of God, who has no partner, son or associate. He also saw Islam as the pure and original form of Abrahamic monotheism, which has succeeded in avoiding any subsequent process of deification.

The process of rational conversion is significantly related to the religious decision for those in search for the new belief system. Author [10] made the argument that people make religious decisions based on rational choice theory to maximize benefits and minimize losses. In other words, there is a religious calculation that enters into their decision in order to highlight the benefits of their religious choice. Thus, when they convert they tend to choose a religion close in doctrine and practice to their original beliefs in order to conserve their religious capital. They converted to Islam partially because they saw it as a continuation of Christianity. The converts did not come to Islam completely lost and without religion, they moved into Islam as a natural progression from Christianity. Many of them consider the message from the Quran to be a continuation of the story that was begun in the Bible; a message that confirms the beliefs they already had about the prophets communicating God's will to people. Islam is easier for these women to assimilate because the prophets and stories in the Bible are, to a large degree, legitimized in the Quran. It is therefore, the conversion from Christianity to Islam is commonly happened as these two religions have many commonalities and close interaction between the two believers which tend to influence with each other.

It is undeniable fact that Islam offers a message of rationality as Islam is not just "faith", but also provides "proofs". It is therefore according to author [3, conversion to Islam has become rational choice in which it makes sense to individual converts. She uses biographical data to adapt rational choice theory to her argument that women in Netherland made decision to convert to Islam are based on logical reasoning. She argues that a belief in God is rational because if this belief turns out

to be true there is the chance of eternal reward, but there is very little to be gained if the proposal is false, thus religious actors act rationally according to costs and benefits. Finally, she argues that in order to fully recognize the rational nature of women's religious decisions, it is necessary to analyse their life histories and identities.

On the basis of online and offline conversion stories, author [3] points out the religious discourse of the rationality and spirituality of Islam. She states that Islam gives a clear guidance to spirituality through the direct accessibility of God and regular moments of prayer. Religion thus becomes embedded in daily life and offer a complete way of life. Islam is also a rational, scientific and logical religion, and this makes it the most convincing religion as compared to the other monotheistic options. Islam's rational and logical character was illustrated with reference to rules regarding eating, drinking and the sexes, as well as to the theological arguments on the Trinity and salvation. The rational, logical and scientific character of Islam make this religion contrast to the Christianity, using such example as the concept of Trinity versus the unity of God; Jesus as the son of God versus Jesus as a prophet; the Bible as written and changed by human hand versus the unchanged perfection of the Quran; and the presence versus absence of the idea of original sin.

Author [3] further argues that the rationality makes Islam an appealing religion, thus leads to the intellectual route to conversion. As one of the converts argues about Islam, "Here is a religion of truth, which can stand up to any test of logic and reason! Just as I always thought religion should be make sense. It should be logical". This theme of Islam's logical, scientific and rational character lead to recognition of realizing the fact one is already a Muslim. Some of the converts describe how they find their own solutions to theological problems and then realize that these self-discoveries happened to be aligned with Islam. They have always rejected the ideas of the Trinity or Jesus as the son of God, but were not aware of the existence of an Islamic alternative. "The more knowledge I acquire about Islam, the more I found that many of the beliefs that I already had were actually Islamic not merely 'common sense.'"

In another study, author [1] points out almost similar argument that rational factors lead to conversion to Islam. Author argues that some converts find Islam as a religion that encompassing religious worldview and does not compartmentalize religion, then choosing Islam enables the converts to connect their daily life to their beliefs – direct accessibility of God without mediators make Islam seem rational. This lead to the rational view on the difference between Islam and Christianity. As author [5] argues that a commonly adduced contrast is the way in which Islam pervades all areas of life while Christianity is confined to church on Sunday. Islam is seen as having a this-worldly, practical ethos, while Christianity is seen as rather vague and ineffable. Most important, perhaps, is the fact that Christianity is perceived as having 'sold out' to liberalism or secularism (for example, liberal Christian attitudes to homosexuality and women priests), and as unable to combat social problems such as drugs and family breakdown. Tim Winter (also known as Abdal-Hakim Murad) feels that the Church has undergone too many reforms, too much laxity...while Islam has never changed. It is an immutable force." Author [5] further argues that it is to say that Islam is purer than Christianity and less influenced by humans. "Muslims do not keep shifting their goal-posts. Christianity changes, it seems so wishy-washy. Others focused on the fact that the message of Islam is simple and universal, in contrast to what they considered to be the convoluted and diluted message of Christianity. Christian doctrine did not make sense, they claimed, whereas in Islam everything can be answered with no requirement for a leap of faith. A persistent theme was the notion that all theological answers could be found in Islam. "Islam for me gives me peace of mind because don't have to understand the Trinity and how God is 'three in one' or that God died on the cross.

The theological based argument as the rational factor of conversion to Islam has become the focal findings of many studies on religious conversion. Author [11] states that the theological superiority of Islam over other faiths is one of the rational factors which attracted the converts to search for the religion of Islam. This can be described as the most important reason for the converts to choose Islam as a new alternative lives. Islam offers some differences with Christian theology which included the doctrines that have set the two faiths apart: the concepts of incarnation and Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, crucifixion and the doctrine of original sin. Some described the appeal of the pure monotheism of Islam, presented not as a polemic, but in a rational, scientific exposition. Others insisted that they always “knew” that there could only be one God. Author [8] argues that the nature of the religion itself and its simplicity appeal strongly to the religious consciousness of people who are drawn to its emphasis on the simple message of monotheism. It thus attracts those who are ‘confused by Christological and Trinitarian controversies’. As another convert seeks to explain, “Something vital seemed to be missing from my life and nothing would fill this vacuum. Being a Christian did not do anything for me, and I began to question the validity of only remembering God one day a week. As with many other Christian too, I had become disillusioned with the hypocrisy of the church and was becoming increasingly unhappy with the concept of Trinity and the deification of Jesus”. Some women find Islam offers equilibrium in its relationship with God. The testimony of a female convert hints at the kind of equilibrium to which Islam gives access: “There was an inner void that was not completely satisfied with academic success or human relationships. I had spent my life longing for a truth in which heart would be compatible with mind, action with thought, intellectual with emotion. I found that reality in Islam.

The search for Islam rationally and intellectually is further described by author [11] that some converts identify the daily discipline and specific requirements of Islam as a crucial reason for their conversion. Islamic guidelines provide reasoned answers to their quest for a structured life, for boundaries and for adherence to prescriptions. They have enjoyed having a “guide for life” that is precise and all encompassing, clear and unambiguous. Some converts described their satisfaction in living their lives according to specific rules, regular responsibilities and a tightly regimented way of life. The daily prayers emphasis on personal responsibility and the clear moral message of Islam were also appealing to many converts. Some converts described their satisfaction in living their lives according to specific rules, regular responsibilities and a tightly regimented way of life. The daily prayers, emphasis on personal responsibility, and the clear moral message of Islam were also appealing to many converts. “I thought it was genius to pray five times a day. It is more comprehensive than Christianity. It’s a total package.”

Author [3] describes the similar findings of the rational factors of conversion to Islam among the Dutch Muslim women. Several converts were attracted to the spiritual and all-encompassing nature of Islam; many were attracted to the rational character of Islam. The other rational attraction that made sense for them on choosing Islam can be highlighted in specific examples - Islam’s regulation of sexuality, parental divorce and Islam’s promotion of a stable family life, Islam’s prohibition of drinking and Islamic prescriptions concerning lifestyle. This explain that Islam is an appealing religion for the converts as it offers the way of life which is considered hard to be found in their previous lifestyle. Hence, embracing Islam make them felt that it had strong, clear values on things they were concerned about. This is further explained by author [5] that the Islamic teachings on women, marriage and family are another aspect which many find attractive. Clearly defined gender roles and the emphasis on a stable family life, for example, may be seen as contrasting with the social fragmentation in Western society. One interviewee said that family life and the value that Islam places on motherhood were deciding factors in her conversion. Another said that prior to her conversion she was terribly confused about the values that society held in relation to women, and

was relieved to find in Islam clear teachings on women's role. In each case it is the contrast with Western norms that potential converts find attractive.

Others felt that their lifestyle had much in common with that prescribed by Islam. "For a number of years, I had been living a Muslim life without knowing it" [2]. They discover that their preferences for modesty and chastity is not strange or defiant but is confirmed as a model way of life. A fundamental appeal of Islam evident in the testimonials is the strong community bonds and kinship that converts feel with other Muslim women. A large number of converts report that they were attracted to Islam because of the supportive community it provides, support they lacked prior to their conversion. Many report that they had sensed that they did not "fit in" socially and were aware and concerned about how they were perceived by others. Conversion provided them not only with a ready-made accepting community, but a community that revered them as special and worthy of respect. Some report that while formerly they had been greatly concerned about the perceptions of their colleagues, of how they looked, how overweight they were, what values they held, what lifestyle choices they made, with conversion they were able to shed this burden and appear comfortable with who they had become [11]. "I was looking for peace. I'd had a rough past. My teenage years weren't great; I was bullied at school, people called me fat and ugly, and I was looking for something to make me happy.... When you walk into a mosque you feel really peaceful. Praying five times a day is really focused. It gives you a purpose in your life" [2].

A family-centred lifestyle in Islam appears to be greatly appreciated by convert women, since it provides for automatic inclusiveness and participation in shared activities and celebrations, as well as genuine mutual caring. "I fell in love with the Muslims whose actual biological family members I could not distinguish because all children were regarded the same and all parents were truly like brothers and sisters in one huge family." The emphasis on family seems especially important to those who view Western society as devaluing traditional family relations included the understanding on the focus of motherhood. The other converts also report that they appear to welcome the concept of the distinct responsibilities and duties within male/female relationships expressed in Islam. They commented on the importance of the fact that the equality granted to men and women in the Qur'an provided for different roles and functions for each gender. Some like the idea of division of labour where it is a man's duty to provide for his wife and family, while the duty of a woman is to raise the children. "My husband has been kind and generous to me and allowed me to make decisions in our home. When I wanted to leave my teacher/counsellor position before our first child was born, he willingly accepted my decision to stay at home and never asked me to keep working to help pay our expenses" [2].

It is to say that the rational factors which are induced to the theological and intellectual argument of the superiority of Islam over other religions and perceiving Islam as a guidance for the structured life, are initially the pull factors of why people turn to Islam. They feel not only Islam is appealing religion as it gives the greatest possible contrast with the culture he or she comes from, but also the satisfaction for the spiritual fulfilment that he or she has been looking for. The converts finally discover a model way of life that they can follow in their daily life activities. As author [11] said, "It is the highest attainment of living in accordance with divine prescriptions." For author [4], this form of conversion is therefore more specifically Islamic in its discourse and rationalizations because it involves the process of learning certain content of religious principles. The learning process needs enthusiasm for a search of meaning in life and to identify what is right or wrong in the social conduct. In other words, the search for spiritual needs is considered Islamic in its discourse as it involves re-examining the ground rules and the lifestyle of the new religion which is normally strange from the culture that has been practiced before.

Based on the discussion above, it will be sum up that choosing Islam due to the rational factors are common observation among the Western converts particularly women. The most appealing message of rationality in Islam which offers an intellectual route to Islam is the act of reading the Quran and its contents. The initial reason for studying the Qur'an is usually the acquaintance with Muslims and sometimes observing practicing Muslims. Other than that, some other converts become aware of the existence of an Islamic way of life which offers them the different new lifestyle with a well-defined code of conduct. This kind of situation can also be seen in the experience of Malaysian converts as the data subsequently presented here are collected from the converts in Sabah, the East Malaysia.

## 5. Rational factors of embracing Islam as experienced by Malaysian converts

Malaysia experiences the process of religious conversion from those who have no religion to those who have converted to certain religion of their choices. There are also some converts who have embraced a certain religion then choose another religion that they think more suitable with their new lifestyle and able to fulfil their spiritual needs. In this context, the conversion to Islam normally comes from the various ethnic backgrounds of Malaysian society. Those are Chinese, Indians, Orang Asli (indigenous people) and native groups of people in Sabah and Sarawak at the East Malaysia. Normally, these people have their own respective identities, cultures and ways of life with their own ethnic norms.

As discussed before, rationality becomes the pull factor of choosing Islam among the Western converts and this indicates almost similar experience with the Malaysian converts. Although their specific experiences vary, there are many commonalities in their conversion to Islam. The following stories help us gain a sense of the variety of ways the converts learned about Islam and the conversion experiences that brought them to the point of declaration of the new faith. The interviews with Muslim converts are gathered from various ethnic backgrounds for those living in Sabah of East Malaysia.

1) I had read the Quran translation for almost three months. In comparison with the Bible, the time taken to read this book was two years. I felt my interest of reading the Bible is not as much as reading the Quran translation. That was why the time taken was longer than reading the Quran translation. I read it non-stop every day. I went through page by page and slept on it. I felt that the Quran communicates directly to me and conveys certain message in the form of story to me. I saw this as the uniqueness of this book. Conversely, the stories in the Bible are not much different from the other books that I have read.

I would give examples of the concept of divinity which my first reading was in surah *al-Ikhlās*. I read verse by verse and I was attracted with the verse *qulhuallahu ahad* (say o Muhammad there is no God except Allah). I got confident with the oneness of the God which I thought it is the comprehensive attribute of the creator. I started to study and did comparison with the certain teachings that I read from the book of Christianity. For example, the concept of Jesus as the Father and the Son. How could Jesus be the Father at the same time is a Son? I asked my friend is it possible that my name is Li Jun Siang (my previous name before conversion to Islam) and at the same time I also use my father's name Li Jun Pang. Certainly I could not be both for the same entity and identified myself as son and father. I felt dissatisfied when I got no answer, instead they said do not ask many questions because this would cause sinful. They advised me to follow whatever has been stated in the teaching of the religion. I felt discomfort since it did not fulfil my intention to search for the truth. (Source: Interview was conducted on November 18, 2008 at researcher's office UMS, Chinese/M-Lbn-Resp1)

2) My first acquainted with Islam is through the column of question and answer in Malay newspaper. I was seven or eight years old. When I was Form 1 and 2, I thought what if I wanted to be a Muslim? It just a feeling.

So coming back to university, mostly by my own research, all my knowledge about Islam is from English and Arabic. Not so much in Malay. My interest in Islam is started from question and answer. Then I realize, what I already know - Islam is not a religion for the Malays – the poverty is not because of the religion of Islam.

You can say Islam is perfect, man not perfect. Islam is simple religion, but life is hard. To get that level of philosophy take intellectual study. It doesn't develop overnight.

3<sup>rd</sup> year university, I became Muslim by self-study. I don't like to ask people because I also know that people also don't have good understanding of their own religions. I want to come to a conclusion by my own. I don't want them to influence me. Of course they will be positively biased towards their own religion. You would never find somebody who whatever religions ... of course good la, if not good why you follow. So I don't want to get a biased - self- study.

The most common question my housemate always asked, "why do you decided to become Muslim? The easiest way to tell them is, "Islam to me is about universal, you look as you and you look God in every human being and that is the conviction from the early on. But as I know more about the philosophy, I realize that you need to realize that all Muslims are brothers. That is why when a person did something wrong, his fellow friend will cover up his wrongdoing even though it actually denying justice to another people. Another reasons I became Muslim is because justice and love.

I always believe in God, I am not an atheist, I never denying the existence of God, always know there is a God. So I always believe there is a powerful being that create us. It is a quest on what is the truth. To me the truth is one that is a loving God as well to find justice. Islam is a belief in god and justice. Every other thing is the specific of the religion. I believe as a Muslim this is my way of life. But I trust Islam because of the oneness of god is love and god is justice. Not only justice which appeal to me but in Islam there is a justice to everyone. Not only the people the same religions. Unfortunately, that is the practice of most Muslims, Malays and other races especially Africans, they forget one thing because the companion of the prophet, the prophet said "you have to defend your brother regardless whether he is right or wrong. If he is right, it is okey but if he is wrong then, you correct his mistake that is you defend your brother. (Source: Interview was conducted on September 20, 2008 at house's respondent, Chinese/F-Peninsular-Resp5)

3) I began acquainted with Islam when I was adapted by Muslim family. I saw the lifestyle of practicing Muslim. When I was in school, my football coach who was also a religious teacher always talk some stories about Islam such as the story of the prophets, the concept of life here and hereafter and the story of genes. At the same time, I also kept asking questions on certain religious teaching particularly on the concept of divinity. Starting from that, the religious teacher brought me home and at that time was a month of Ramadan whereby most of the Muslim was fasting. He asked me if I could be fasting. But it was an option to me either I was willing to fasting or not. I said I would try. From now on I got the live experience of observing the practicing Muslim lifestyle. The most attraction part was when I saw his son prayed. Then, I asked the teacher if possible I converted to Islam. (Source: Interview was conducted on Sep-09 2009 at respondent's office, Iban/M-Sarawa-Resp63)

The findings from the biographical data of new Muslims in Malaysia highlight certain message of rationality in Islam such as the concept of divinity, the oneness of God, the concept of universality, the concept of here and hereafter and also the appealing factor from practicing Muslim lifestyle such as performance of daily prayer and fasting. In comparison with the Western Muslim converts, the Malaysian converts show not much difference in expressing their understanding on the

message of rationality in Islam. These have become part of contributing factors for the converts to learn and discover the uniqueness of Islamic teachings which eventually lead them to choose Islam as a new way of life. The rational factors of embracing Islam conveys the message that the religious elements and the internal satisfaction are among the most encouraging factors that lead to the spiritual journey for finding the meaning of life in Islam. Nevertheless, the other driven factors such as marriage of Muslim couples, following the family converting to Islam, the effect of mixing with Muslims, get inspiration/dreaming and easy to get financial aid/welfare are among the contributing factors to embrace Islam.

## 6. Conclusion

It can be sum up that choosing Islam as an alternative way of life is part of the process to search for the spiritual fulfilment. It is considered as one of the various means and reasons for conversion to Islam. The study shows that there are some key themes in Islam that offer the message of rationality for those in need to fulfil the spiritual void. The New Muslim biographical data outline the key themes of rationality in Islam such as the well-defined code of conduct in daily life, the scientific aspect of the Quran, the theological elements in Islam, rules for social relationships and the belief of Islam as to be natural and complete way of life. Hence, studying the rational factors in the spiritual journey of embracing Islam significantly contributes to the understanding on the rational choice theory that the converts made decision to embrace Islam because of the logical reasoning and internal satisfaction that they have never found it in his/her previous religion. This would deny the fact that marriage with Muslim spouse is the main factor of conversion to Islam and the rationality and intellectual search is the most critical religious decision for the Muslim converts.

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