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Active Reception Communication and Rational Choice in Religious Conversion: A Case Study of a Former Christian Leader

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ABSTRACT

Existing studies on religious conversion mainly frame it as an internal, individual, and psychologically driven process, overlooking the communicative and rational dynamics that shape belief transformation. This limitation is particularly evident in cases involving religious authorities, where conversion entails not only personal change but also social and symbolic disruption. This study aims to reconceptualize religious conversion as a communicative-rational process by examining the case of a former Christian religious leader who converted to Islam. Using a qualitative constructivist approach, this research employed a single-case study design with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to capture the subject's lived experience. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, complemented by contextual observation and document analysis. The analytical process involved initial coding, emergent theme development, and interpretative integration. The findings demonstrate that conversion is driven by an active reception of religious messages that evolves into systematic, argumentative evaluation. Communicative elements such as dialogical narratives, cross-textual references, and high-stakes framing serve as persuasive mechanisms that trigger cognitive dissonance and reflexive self-awareness. Contrary to conventional Rational Choice assumptions, decision-making is not guided by utilitarian calculation but by the pursuit of epistemic consistency and the validation of truth. Moreover, conversion operates as a transformative process that reconstructs both identity and symbolic authority within shifting social contexts. This study advances a theoretical repositioning of religious conversion as a multidimensional process that integrates communication, cognition, and rationality. By bridging active reception and rational choice perspectives, it offers a more robust analytical framework for understanding belief transformation in contemporary society.

Keywords: Religious conversion, communicative rationality, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), belief transformation, cognitive dissonance.

ABSTRAK

Studi-studi yang ada mengenai konversi agama umumnya memandangnya sebagai proses yang bersifat internal, individual, dan didorong oleh faktor psikologis, sehingga mengabaikan dinamika komunikatif dan rasional yang membentuk transformasi keyakinan. Keterbatasan ini terutama terlihat dalam kasus yang melibatkan otoritas keagamaan, di mana konversi tidak hanya

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mencakup perubahan pribadi tetapi juga gangguan tatanan sosial dan simbolik. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengonseptualisasikan ulang konversi agama sebagai proses yang bersifat komunikatif-rasional dengan mengkaji kasus seorang mantan pemimpin agama Kristen yang berpindah memeluk Islam. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan konstruktivis kualitatif, penelitian ini menerapkan desain studi kasus tunggal serta metode Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) untuk menangkap pengalaman hidup subjek. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur, yang dilengkapi dengan observasi kontekstual dan analisis dokumen. Proses analisis mencakup pengodean awal, pengembangan tema yang muncul (*emergent themes*), dan integrasi interpretatif. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa konversi didorong oleh penerimaan aktif terhadap pesan-pesan keagamaan yang kemudian berkembang menjadi evaluasi yang sistematis dan argumentatif. Elemen-elemen komunikatif—seperti narasi dialogis, referensi lintas-teks, dan pembingkai isu yang krusial—berfungsi sebagai mekanisme persuasif yang memicu disonansi kognitif dan kesadaran diri yang reflektif. Berbeda dengan asumsi konvensional mengenai Pilihan Rasional (*Rational Choice*), pengambilan keputusan dalam hal ini tidak didasarkan pada kalkulasi utilitarian, melainkan pada upaya mencapai konsistensi epistemik dan validasi kebenaran. Selain itu, konversi berperan sebagai proses transformatif yang merekonstruksi identitas sekaligus otoritas simbolik di tengah konteks sosial yang terus berubah. Penelitian ini menawarkan reposisi teoretis mengenai konversi agama sebagai proses multidimensi yang mengintegrasikan komunikasi, kognisi, dan rasionalitas. Dengan menjembatani perspektif penerimaan aktif dan pilihan rasional, penelitian ini menyajikan kerangka analisis yang lebih kokoh untuk memahami transformasi keyakinan dalam masyarakat kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Konversi agama, rasionalitas komunikatif, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), transformasi keyakinan, disonansi kognitif

INTRODUCTION

Religious conversion is no longer understood merely as a personal and final transfer of beliefs, as assumed in the essentialist approach (Burhani, 2020). On the contrary, conversion is an ongoing arena for the construction of meaning, in which religious identity is shaped through communication practices within specific social contexts (Arifin et al., 2022). Religion does not exist as a static entity, rather, it emerges as a product of interpretative, articulative, and negotiative processes of messages that influence individuals' understanding of their spiritual reality (Lubis, 2025).

Religious conversions, especially when they involve authoritative figures such as religious leaders, often trigger significant social disruption (Bruner & Hurlbut, 2020). In Indonesia, changes in religious leaders' beliefs are not only interpreted as personal choices, but also perceived as events that shake the legitimacy of religious authorities and community relations. One prominent example is the case of Syamsul Arifin Nababan, a former pastor who decided to convert after an intense theological search. The decision not only had an impact on the transformation of personal identity, but also triggered

tensions with the previous social environment, including opposition from the community of origin and external pressure regarding his social status as a religious figure (Panjimas.com, 2018; Hidayatullah, 2021). In this context, conversion is not a purely personal experience, but as a communicative event in public space, where religious narratives are produced, debated, and contested through various forms of communication. As a result, the crisis of faith becomes an arena for negotiating meaning that involves not only individuals, but also broader social structures and symbolic authority (Al-Zaman, 2020; Mihai, 2023; Paloutzian & Park, 2021).

The crisis of faith becomes a disruptive force that undermines the stability of this meaning. In this phase, individuals are not in a passive position, but engage in an intense process of internal and external dialogue, in which various claims to truth are encountered, contested, and negotiated (Safitri & Ningsih, 2025; Snook et al., 2023). Religious messages are no longer accepted as authority to be taken for granted, but are tested through rationalization, experience, and social interaction. Thus, religious conversion results from a contestation of meaning that takes place in a complex and non-linear communication space (Carls, 2024; Patrick, 2023; Rohmaniyah et al., 2022).

The active reception communication approach is relevant for explaining how individuals construct meaning from the religious messages they receive. This perspective positions the individual as an agent who can select, interpret, and rationalize messages according to their horizon of experience and interests (Bakti, 2024). Integration with Rational Choice Theory shows that conversion decisions are not only spiritual, but also the result of rational considerations of benefits, experiences, and social expectations (Gartrell, 1985). Religious conversion can be understood as a communicative practice that shows how identity and beliefs are actively negotiated in crisis situations.

Conversions involving religious authority figures are more complex than those among lay individuals. Religious leaders not only have a personal identity, but also hold symbolic authority and social legitimacy as guardians of doctrine in their communities (Kralev-Tovi, 2023). In various cases, such as the conversions of Yusuf Estes, who was a Christian priest before converting to Islam, and Leopold Weiss, who transformed from a Jewish intellectual to a Muslim thinker, it is seen that the conversion process involves a fundamental shift from the position of "religious authority" to the "truth-seeking subject." These changes are not only spiritual, but also shake social identity, symbolic authority, and relationships with the community of origin (Bouzida, 2024; Hoek, 2025). Conversion of religious leaders cannot be understood as a linear or purely rational process. Rather, it results from a complex interplay between a crisis of faith, exposure to alternative religious

discourse, and a process of critical reflection on previously believed doctrines (Hidayat & Sherina, 2020). Those who once served as producers of religious meaning have become active recipients who reinterpret the messages they receive through dialogue, interfaith readings, and intense social experiences. This shift confirms that the conversion of religious leaders is a process of identity reconstruction, marked by the negotiation of meaning, in which old authority is questioned and replaced by new horizons of understanding (Rambo & Farhadian, 2014; Stronge et al., 2021).

In religious organizations, communication not only functions as a means of conveying messages, but also as a key mechanism for shaping the identity, structure, and legitimacy of institutions (Sumarlan et al., 2025). Furthermore, communication in religious institutions acts as a medium for transmitting authority and values that bind the relationship between leaders and the congregation (Fahmi et al., 2025). When a religious leader undergoes a change in belief, what is disturbed is not only the spiritual aspect, but also the communication system that underpins the organization's legitimacy. This kind of event can be understood as a disruption to public expectations and trust, which has the potential to trigger a crisis of legitimacy in the relationship between the leader and his followers (Morehouse et al., 2025).

In this context, Syamsul Arifin Nababan's conversion can be understood as a form of communication crisis in the relationship between the leader and the congregation. As a figure who previously served as a source of authority and a producer of religious meaning, Nababan's change of position disrupted the communicative expectations that had been built up in his community. From a crisis communication perspective, this situation reflects a disruption of trust and legitimacy, where messages once considered authoritative are questioned and renegotiated by their audiences. This crisis is not only related to changes in personal beliefs, but also to the collapse of the stability of the communication system that has sustained the relationship between leaders and their followers, thus triggering tensions in social structures and collective interpretations (Coombs, 2014; Strandberg & Vigsø, 2016). This change also reflects a shift in the relationship between knowledge and authority. Referring to Foucault (1982), power operates not only through formal structures, but also through the production of knowledge that shapes what is considered right. When a religious leader changes his beliefs, he not only abandons his authoritative position, but also deconstructs the knowledge system he previously represented. Thus, conversion becomes a critical lens that reveals how power, communication, and identity intertwine to shape and undermine legitimacy in religious communities.

This study frames religious conversion as the result of the interaction between meaning interpretation and decision-making in the context of dynamic communication. The perspective of active receptive communication holds that the individual does not act as a passive receiver, but rather as an agent who actively interprets the message based on their experiences, social background, and frame of meaning. However, the process of interpretation does not stop at the production of meaning, but continues at the evaluation stage, where individuals compare, test, and reflect on the various alternative beliefs they face.

Rational choice theory is used to explain how individuals then make decisions based on the results of their interpretation. Unlike the approach that views rationality narrowly as an economic calculation, this study positions rationality as a process that is formed through communicative interaction and social experience. Thus, active acceptance and rational choice do not contradict each other, but rather complement each other: active acceptance explains how meaning is constructed, while rational choice explains how meaning is used to determine the choice of belief. This integration allows for an understanding of religious conversion as a process that is not only cognitive, but also communicative and contextual (Gartrell, 1985).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a constructivist paradigm and a single-case study design, combined with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to deeply understand the experience of religious conversion as a complex, subjective, and interpretive process. The constructivist approach was chosen because it allows for an exploration of how social realities, religious identities, and beliefs are shaped through interactions, experiences, and communication practices. In this context, religious conversion is understood not as a static event but as a dynamic process of ongoing interpretation, reflection, and negotiation of meaning. Science is used as the primary analytical approach because it focuses on how individuals give meaning to significant life experiences, particularly in situations of existential crisis, such as religious conversion. This approach places the subject as an active agent who reflects on their experience, while acknowledging the researcher's role in interpreting the subject construct (double hermeneutics). In addition, IPA is idiographic, enabling an in-depth and contextually grounded analysis of a single case without over-generalizing.

Research data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, contextual observations, and document analysis focused on the subjects' communication experiences and practices. The interviews were conducted in stages to explore (1) the experience of a faith crisis, (2) the process of interpreting religious messages, and (3) reflection in conversion decision-making. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and systematically analyzed to maintain depth and accuracy of the data. Observations and documents were used as supporting data to enrich the context and strengthen interpretations of the subject's experiences.

The data analysis process consists of four stages. First, the researcher conducted multiple readings to gain a thorough understanding of the subject's narrative of experience. Second, the researcher carried out initial coding by identifying descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments that emerged from the data. Third, the researcher developed emergent themes that represent patterns of meaning in the subject's experience. Fourth, these themes were connected and organized into a more conceptual structure. This step resulted in an integrated understanding of the dynamics of religious conversion.

In this study, the analysis is not based on predefined categories, but rather is developed inductively through in-depth engagement with the data. The themes that emerged were then interpreted by integrating the perspectives of active reception communication and rational choice theory. Those perspectives were used to explain the relationship among the processes of meaning, communication interaction, and decision-making in a broader social context.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the data, this study applied triangulation across sources, methods, and theories. Source triangulation was carried out by involving supporting informants who had a direct connection to the subject, such as family and colleagues in the religious environment before and after conversion. Method triangulation was carried out by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documents, while theoretical triangulation was done by integrating various perspectives in the analysis. In addition, member checking and trail audit techniques were used to ensure transparency and consistency in the research process.

With this approach, the research aims to produce a deep understanding of religious conversion as a subjective experience that is not only spiritual but also communicative and rational. It is shaped by the interaction between individual reflection, exposure to discourse, and the negotiation of meaning in a social context.

Table 1. Variable Operations

No	Key Concepts/ Variables	Dimensions	Operational Indicators	Data Source	Analytical Techniques
1	Active Reception	Message Interpretation	Subject's ability to understand and interpret religious messages	In-depth interviews	Emergent themes (IPA)
		Critical Evaluation	Comparison of interfaith teachings (Islam, Christianity, etc.)	Interviews, documents	Emergent Themes (IPA)
		Negotiation of Meaning	A process of reflection and internal dialogue on beliefs	Interview	Hermeneutic interpretation
2	Communicative Persuasion	Narrative Structure	The use of religious leaders' (kyai vs. priest) dialogues in books	Documents (books), interviews	Narrative analysis
		Epistemic Legitimacy	Use of scripture references in arguments	Documents, interviews	Content analysis
		Cognitive Dissonance	The appearance of doubts against initial beliefs	Interview	Phenomenological interpretation
		Source Credibility	Perception of <i>kyai</i> authority (cross-authority)	Interview	Emergent themes (IPA)
3	Rational Choice in Conversion	Rational Evaluation	Logical considerations between belief systems	Interview	Emergent themes (IPA)
		Epistemic Consistency	Assessment of doctrinal coherence	Interview	Conceptual analysis
		Decision Making	Conversion decision	Interview	Phenomenological interpretation

4	Self-Awareness	Cognitive Reflection	Awareness of belief inconsistencies	Interview	Emergent themes (IPA)
		Internalization	The process of internalizing new values and teachings	Interview	Emergent themes (IPA)
5	Identity Reconstruction	Identity Transformation	Change from religious leaders to converts	Interviews, observations	Interpretive analysis
		Social Negotiation	Adaptation in a new community	Interview	Contextual analysis
6	Reconstruction of Authority	Legitimacy Disruption	Loss of authority in old communities	Interview	Critical analysis
		Re-legitimacy	Establishment of new authority in new communities	Interview	Emergent themes (IPA)

Source: Developed by the Author

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Biography and Activities of Syamsul Arifin Nababan

Syamsul Arifin Nababan was born and raised in a family environment with a strong Christian religious background, where his father was a church leader, and his mother was active in religious ministry activities. This environment placed Nababan in a structured system of religious communication from an early age, where religious authority, doctrine, and practice were conveyed intensively and repeatedly. In this context, the process of receiving messages in the early phases tends to take place in a relatively stable authoritative framework (Muhammad, 2011; Interview with Syamsul Arifin Nababan, 2021).

However, the most significant factor shaping how Nababan received and processed religious messages was his formal education at Sekolah Tinggi Teologi (STT) Nomensen, a theological college in Medan. This education provided a systematic understanding of the doctrines, texts, and theological logic of the Christian tradition. Nababan not only played the role of a believer, but also as an individual with the capacity to understand the argumentative structure of religious teachings (Syarifah, 2018).

From the perspective of active reception, this condition indicates that the subject has strong prior knowledge, which then serves as a reference framework for interpreting new messages. This is important because the process of receiving da'wah messages does not occur among "empty" individuals, but in subjects who already have a previous knowledge system. In other words, every message received will be compared, tested, and negotiated against the theological framework that already exists.

In addition to formal education, Nababan also showed intellectual tendencies through his reading habits and his interest in comparative religious studies. He stated: "I do enjoy reading, I learn not only one religion, but also many other teachings." (Interview with Syamsul Arifin Nababan, 2021). This statement indicates a shift from institutional messaging to more reflective and exploratory engagement. In the framework of active reception, this phase can be understood as the transition from structured reception to active decoding, where individuals begin to actively compare and evaluate various sources of meaning.

Exposure to these various religious discourses broadens the horizon of Nababan's meaning and allows for a process of cross-faith comparison. This condition reinforces the subject's position as an active audience who not only passively receives messages, but also selects and reinterprets them based on cognitive considerations and personal experiences. Thus, the process of receiving messages becomes more complex and non-linear.

The combination of a theological education at STT and the intellectual habit of reading forms a relatively high interpretive capacity. This capacity is a key factor in explaining how Nababan responds to the da'wah messages he receives, especially in the context of comparative teachings and the rational evaluation of his beliefs. Biography, in the context of this research, provides a foundation for understanding that the conversion process does not occur instantaneously, but through the interaction between prior knowledge, exposure to new discourses, and the individual's ability to interpret and negotiate meaning. The interpretive capacity formed in this phase is an important prerequisite for the emergence of crises, reflections, and decisions that are analyzed in the next section.

Narrative Persuasion and Rational Evaluation: Communicative Triggers of Self-Awareness in Religious Conversion

The delivery of religious messages does not always rely on direct coercion, but rather on the construction of meaning that allows the individual to feel that the decisions made are the result of his or her own consciousness. In this context, the concept of 'coerseduction' does not refer solely to coercion, but to communication strategies that

combine implicit persuasion with a specific framing to produce an internalizing effect without resistance. The recipient of the message remains in the position of an active agent who interprets, evaluates, and makes decisions independently (Andi Faisal Bakti, 2004).

Nababan met with a trader and preacher from Madura at the Pematang Siantar terminal. Accidental encounters give rise to interpersonal communication, in which Islam and Christianity were discussed in dialogue (Nurdin, 2020). A worn book containing a dialogue between a kyai and a priest was given to Nababan on the eve of the farewell. The aged book, which has a wager on religious conversion for the loser—if they fail to respond to the question in the dialogue—inspires Nababan’s repentance. The debate between the two figures ends with the priest admitting his defeat, and he abandons his religion and converts to Islam. After reading the book, Nababan also became curious about the kyai, who had many Christian references and mastered Christian teachings, which encouraged him to meet the kyai. As he stated, “This man is really great, mastering Christian references, mastering Christian teachings. I want to meet the kyai.” (Interview with Syamsul Arifin Nababan, 2021). The preacher replied, “Kyai has been dead for a long time, but if you want such a dialogue of knowledge, there are many places (where you may go).”

This dialogue from the Bible, as shown by Nababan, states that Jesus was sent only to the Children of Israel; Jesus answers: “I am sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” (Gospel Matthew 15: 24). It is also in accordance with the Qur’an that the Prophet Jesus (AS) was a Messenger sent by Allah only to the Children of Israel at that time, not to all people in the world. As the following quote:

وَرَسُولًا إِلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ أَنِّي قَدْ جِئْتُكُمْ بِآيَةٍ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ

And (as) the Apostle to the Children of Israel (who said to them): “Indeed I (Isa Al-Masih) have come to you with a sign (miracle) from your God, ...” (Q.S. Ali ‘Imran (3): 49)

وَإِذْ قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ يَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيَّ مِنَ التَّوْرَةِ وَمُبَشِّرًا بِرَسُولٍ يَأْتِي مِنْ بَعْدِي اسْمُهُ أَحْمَدُ فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ قَالُوا هَذَا سِحْرٌ مُبِينٌ

And (remember) when Jesus, son of Mary, said, “O Children of Israel! Verily, I am the Messenger of Allah to you, confirming the book (which was sent down) before me, namely the Torah and giving glad tidings to a Messenger who will come after me, whose name is Ahmad (Muhammad).” However, when the Apostle came to them with clear evidence, they said, “This is real magic.” (Q.S. Al Saff (61): 6)

The harmony between the references to the Gospel and the Qur'an in the dialogue shows that the process of seeking truth does not end with persuasion, but continues through text-based argumentation. In this context, Nababan actively compares and tests the consistency of different teachings. This reinforces that the decisions made are the result of rational processes based on epistemic legitimacy, not just the influence of interpersonal communication.

The figure below shows that the communicative elements in the book work in an integrated way to shape the persuasion process. The dialogue format creates the impression of objectivity, while the scriptural references reinforce the legitimacy of the argument. Critical questions trigger cognitive dissonance, which encourages the reader to question their initial beliefs. On the other hand, representing the kyai as a figure who masters the teachings of other religions increases the credibility of the message. This combination leads to active cognitive engagement, which is required for the emergence of self-awareness.

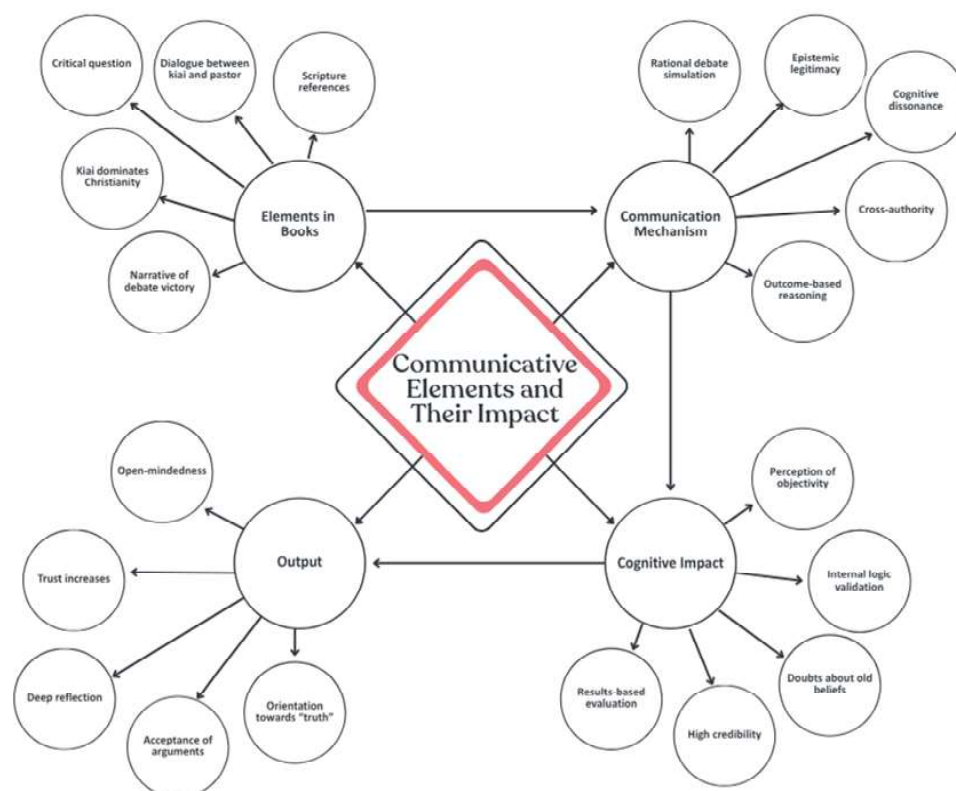


Figure 1. Communicative Elements and Their Impact

Source: Developed by the author

Nababan decided to convert at that point after meeting and conversing with a kyai who explained Islam in detail and enlightened him about it. He did so in 1991 at the Raudlatul Uloom Islamic Boarding School in Jember, East Java. After reciting the Shahada, Nababan spent three years studying Islam at a *pesantren* (boarding school). In 1994, he moved to Jakarta. Then, in 1996, following his conversion, Nababan was admitted to LIPIA, the Jakarta campus of Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University in Saudi Arabia.

In addition to the impact of his discussion with the Madura kyai, Nababan also enjoys researching comparative religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and particularly Islam. Nababan believes that Islamic history and literature are more logical and accurate. Islam is a more structured, focused, and coherent concept that encourages religious conversion. He stated:

“I really like reading, as well as discussing religion as hobbies, so that’s what brought me to this *hidayah* (guidance) because I learned from comparative religion. I studied religious science, not only studying Islam, but also Buddhism and its history, how Hinduism, how Confucianism, how Witra, Zoroaster, Sinto, and so on.”

Reading books is one of Nababan’s pastimes. He then challenges himself to engage in comparative theological debates. He reads every book related to religion. Nababan concluded that Islam is the true religion because he was able to comprehend the ideas, doctrines, and texts of other religions through this comparison. He claims that since nothing in Islam is outdated, the idea of Islam teaches modernity and progress.

Another reason he converts is that he believes Islam is a religion of knowledge rather than a religion of myths, dogmas, or beliefs. Islam is a religion with strict regulations. This is true both in terms of regulations, which are extremely explicit about how they are to be applied, and in terms of incentives and penalties. In Christianity, which he believes in, there are rules, but they do not specify how they are applied, such as the phrase, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Interview with Syamsul Arifin Nababan, 2021).

According to him, this is limited only to the title, without an explanation of how it is implemented. On the other hand, Nababan explained that Islam has more detailed rules, such as the teaching “Love the creatures on Earth, later those in Heaven will love you,” which is not only normative but also has a concrete form of implementation. This is reflected in the obligation of zakat, which carries moral consequences in the form of rewards and punishments, as in the teachings about caring for orphans and the poor (Interview with Syamsul Arifin Nababan, 2021). In his view, Islam is perceived as a more realistic teaching system because it has a direct relationship between values and practices.

This construction of rationality is also reinforced by the narrative in the books he reads, specifically through the “conversion wager” mechanism in the debate between the kyai and the priest. The narrative does not simply function as a drama, but rather as a high-stakes framing that puts the truth in the immediate consequences of a shift in belief. In this context, the stakes increase the weight of cognitive evaluation, since each argument is assessed not only normatively, but also for its rational implications. Readers are encouraged to make more serious and consistent judgments, thereby strengthening the rational choice process for determining what is believed to be true. Meanwhile, the rationality built comes not only from the content of the teachings, but also from the way the message is constructed, which simultaneously encourages the individual’s reflective awareness in making religious decisions.

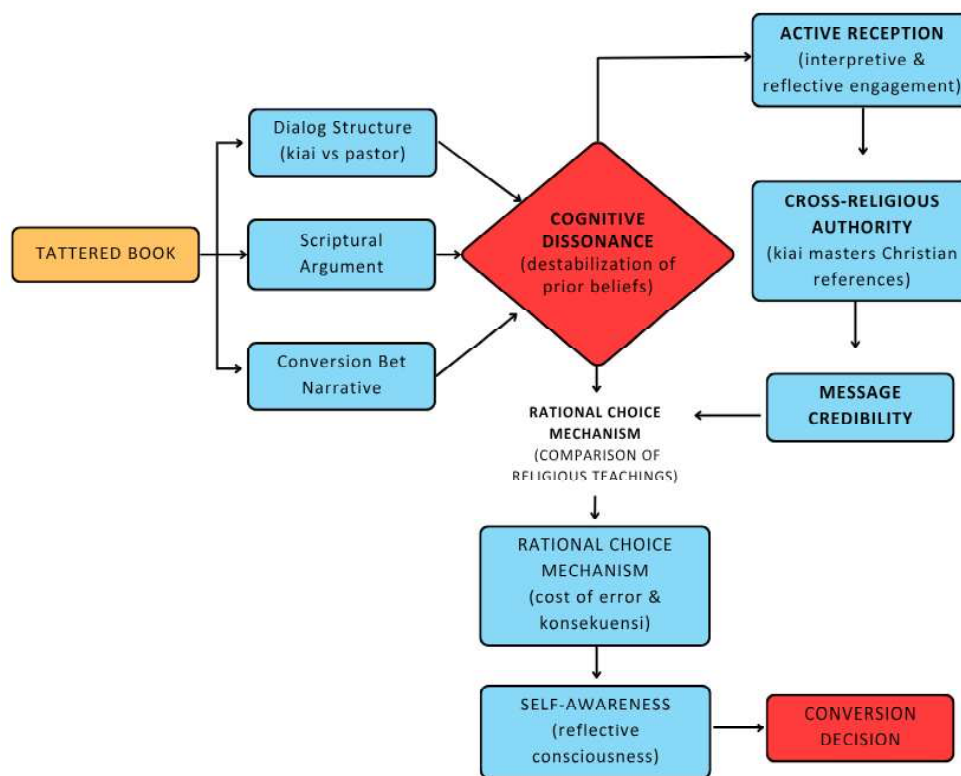


Figure 1. Persuasion of ‘Tattered Books’ in Triggering Self-Awareness and Religious Conversion

Source: Developed by the author

This model shows that “tattered books” (low-cost, widely circulated polemical booklets) do not simply function as narrative media, but rather as structured persuasion tools. Its communicative strength lies in integrating dialogical forms, scripture-based

arguments, and conversion-wager narratives into a form of unified persuasion strategy.

Firstly, the structure of the dialogue between the kyai and the priest creates the impression of objectivity and openness, positioning the reader as a passive recipient and a rational evaluator. Second, the use of scripture references provides epistemic legitimacy that is relevant to the reader's background, thereby increasing the acceptability of the message. Third, the conversion wager narratives serve as a high-stakes framing device that links truth to existential consequences, thereby intensifying cognitive evaluation. The combination of these elements triggers cognitive dissonance, a state of incompatibility between the initial belief and the argument presented. This dissonance is the starting point for active reception, where individuals interpret, compare, and reflect on the information they receive. In this process, the kyai figure, depicted as mastering Christian references, plays an important role as a cross-referential authority, increasing the credibility of the message and strengthening the legitimacy of the argument.

Moreover, individuals enter the stage of rational evaluation, which involves systematically comparing religious teachings. In this context, conversion wager narratives are not understood merely as dramatic, but as a mechanism that increases the "cost of error." This encourages individuals to make more serious and in-depth judgments. This is in line with rational choice theory, in which decisions are made based on logical considerations to maximize truth and minimize error. Meanwhile, the self-awareness that arises is not the result of direct pressure, but the product of a gradual cognitive process involving dissonance, active reflection, source credibility, and rational evaluation. Ultimately, conversion decisions can be understood as the result of conscious, reflective, and knowledge-based choices, rather than simply an emotional response or the result of one-sided persuasion.

Reconstructing Identity and Authority: Conversion as Communicative Transformation

The conversion experienced by Syamsul Arifin Nababan not only represents a change in personal beliefs, but also shows a fundamental reconstruction of identity. As a former religious leader, his identity was initially formed within the framework of a religious authority that cast him as a producer of meaning and the custodian of doctrinal legitimacy. In this position, identity is not only personal, but also tied to an institutional structure that provides symbolic recognition and authority. However, the conversion process significantly shifts that position, from an authoritative figure to a reflective subject who actively interprets and evaluates various claims of truth.

From the perspective of communication and active acceptance, these changes suggest that religious identity is not static, but rather is formed through a dynamic interaction among experience, knowledge, and communication practices (López-López & Sánchez, 2023; Wahid, 2025). Nababan did not simply abandon his old identity, but reconstructed himself by reinterpreting the religious messages he received. This process involves intense internal dialogue, accompanied by external interactions that broaden the horizons of meaning. Thus, conversion can be understood as a process of identity rearticulation that unfolds gradually through the ongoing negotiation of meaning.

Furthermore, this transformation also shifts the symbolic authority the subject holds. Prior to conversion, Nababan's legitimacy stemmed from his position in the structure of religious institutions, where authority was built through doctrinal mastery and community recognition. However, after conversion, the basis of legitimacy is disrupted, so the subject must re-establish his authority within a new framework of knowledge and community. In this context, changes in beliefs not only alter the position of the individual in the social structure, but also shift the relationship between knowledge and the power that underpins that authority (Leo et al., 2021; Pennycook et al., 2020). Authority is no longer understood as a permanent, inherent attribute, but rather as a social construct that depends on the distribution of knowledge and on the practice of communication, both of which are constantly negotiated.

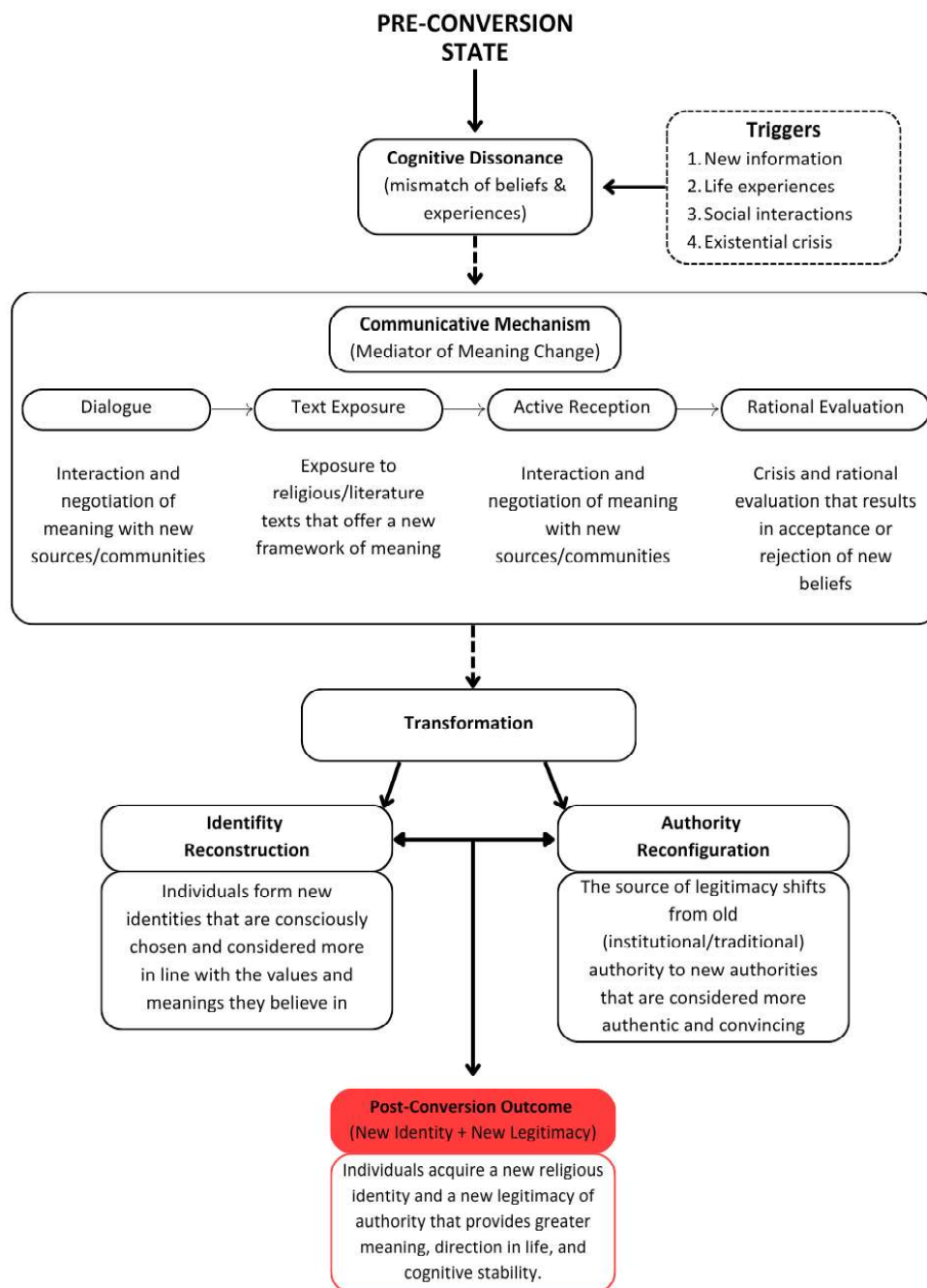


Figure 3. Communicative Mechanism of Identity and Authority Reconstruction in Religious Conversion

Source: Developed by the author

Conversion in this context can be understood as a communicative transformation, in which a change in identity and authority occurs through a complex process of meaning. Interpersonal interaction, exposure to religious texts, and interfaith dialogues serve as a

medium that enables intense negotiation of meaning (Harris & Corriveau, 2021; Schaik & Doomen, 2024). This process is not linear, but rather involves cognitive dissonance, critical reflection, and rational evaluation of various alternative beliefs. The integration of active acceptance and rational choice theory shows that the reconstruction of identity and authority is driven not only by subjective experience, but also by rational considerations including the evaluation of doctrinal consistency, epistemic legitimacy, and practical relevance in life (Palacio-Vera, 2025; Steinberg & Kleinert, 2022). Active acceptance explains how individuals construct meaning through communication interactions, while rational choice theory explains how meaning is used to determine belief choices reflexively (Krstiæ, 2022).

Furthermore, the reconstruction of identity and authority does not take place in a neutral space, but rather in a social context full of tension and contestation over meaning. The change in position from a religious leader to a convert not only marks a personal transformation, but also triggers a process of delegitimization within the community of origin, as well as demands the formation of new legitimacy in different religious communities. This condition suggests that conversion to authoritative figures has more complex implications than conversion to lay individuals, because it involves a shift in position in the symbolic power structure. Subjects not only lose their previous legitimacy base, but also face the need to build new credibility through the internalization of knowledge, adaptation of communication, and integration into different social networks. These findings also broaden the perspective on communication by showing that the process of message interpretation does not end with the formation of meaning, but continues through the transformation of individuals' social positions. Thus, religious conversion among authoritative figures can be understood as a multidimensional transformation process that is cognitive, communicative, and structural.

Theoretical Implications: Challenging and Reframing Religious Conversion as a Communicative-Rational Process

This research fundamentally challenges the dominant assumptions in the study of religious conversion that tend to frame conversion as an internal, individual, and linear experience. A classical approach that treats a crisis of faith as the primary trigger for belief change proved insufficient to explain the complexity of the process identified in this study. The findings of this study show that religious conversion cannot be reduced to a purely psychological transformation, but is rather the result of a communicative process involving negotiation of meaning, social interaction, and cognitive evaluation that unfolds

in layers. This is in line with Langewiesche (2020), who sees conversion as a process of “negotiated meaning” that continues in social relations, not an instantaneous individual decision.

The concept of active reception is no longer adequate if it is understood solely as a process of interpreting messages. Empirical data show that the acceptance of religious messages develops into a systematic, argumentative evaluation, in which individuals actively compare, test, and verify the consistency of belief systems. This process suggests that active acceptance does not stop at the stage of meaning, but continues into the production of decisions based on epistemic validation. These findings are supported by the study of Wardani et al. (2024), which showed that individuals not only receive messages, but also engage in interpretive processes based on an interpretive understanding of the text and religious experiences in a reflective manner. Active reception needs to be repositioned as a cognitive-communicative mechanism that includes interpretation, dissonance, and rational justification.

These findings also reshape the understanding of rationality in rational choice theory. The rationality that emerges in the conversion process does not operate within a utilitarian framework oriented toward social or material gain. The decisions were made under high-risk conditions, characterized by the potential for loss of symbolic authority, disruption of social relations, and delegitimization in the community of origin. The fact that decisions are still made in such situations suggests that rationality is better understood as an attempt to achieve epistemic consistency and cognitive certainty. Fox & Öztürk (2024) state that in the context of religion, rationality is often not based on material gain, but is concerned with broader meanings, beliefs, and value orientations. The orientation toward “truth” has become more dominant than the calculation of benefits, thus shifting the understanding of rationality from the instrumental dimension to the epistemic dimension.

On the other hand, the persuasion mechanisms identified in this study cannot be fully explained by classical persuasion models that emphasize explicit intent or direct pressure. The findings suggest a pattern of persuasion that operates through subtle yet structured communication. This includes dialogical narratives, text-based legitimacy, and high-stakes framing that trigger cognitive dissonance without generating overt resistance. Tahir (2023) states that persuasion in conversion often works through implicit mechanisms, such as narratives, interpersonal interactions, and the internalization of meaning, all without direct coercion. This position puts the individual as an agent who feels autonomous, even though it is communicatively directed toward a specific conclusion. The concept of coerseduction becomes relevant for explaining how persuasion can occur implicitly through the

integration between freedom of interpretation and strong argumentative direction.

Religious conversions in this study indicate that changes in beliefs are inseparable from the reconstruction of identity and authority. Langewiesche (2020) emphasizes that conversion often involves changes in social position, power relations, and identity negotiations within new communities. The shift from a position as a religious leader to a subject who reflects new beliefs indicates a disruption in the structure of symbolic legitimacy. Religious identity in this case is not fixed but is formed through communication and social recognition, both of which are constantly negotiated. Changes in the adopted knowledge system have direct implications for shifts in authority, so conversion can be understood as a transformation process that involves the simultaneous relationship among knowledge, communication, and power.

Nonetheless, these findings need to be interpreted within certain contextual constraints. Le Poidevin (2021) states that conversion narratives often also contain the possibility of post-hoc rationalization, in which individuals reconstruct their conversion experiences as rational arguments after a decision has been made. The conversion process analyzed occurred among individuals with high intellectual capacity, a strong theological background, and extensive exposure to interfaith discourses. This condition allows for a more reflective and argumentative evaluation process than conversion in other contexts. Moreover, it cannot be ignored that the rational narrative presented is a form of post-hoc rationalization, in which the decisions that have been taken are then reframed in a coherent argumentative framework. This suggests that emotional and existential dimensions remain potentially present, even if they do not appear explicitly in the subject's narrative.

This study proposes a paradigm shift in understanding religious conversion. Conversion can no longer be understood as a purely internal and spiritual phenomenon, but as a multidimensional, communicative-rational process. This process includes the production of meaning, cognitive evaluation, persuasion strategies, and the negotiation of identity and authority within dynamic social contexts. This approach creates space for the development of a more integrative theoretical framework by placing communication at the center of explanations for the dynamics of belief transformation in contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that religious conversion cannot be understood as a purely personal, internal, and linear process, but as a complex, communicative, and rational one. Using the active reception approach and Rational Choice Theory, it was found that individuals act as active agents who interpret, compare, and evaluate various religious messages based on their experiences, knowledge, and social interactions.

The conversion process experienced by Syamsul Arifin Nababan shows that the acceptance of religious messages evolves from mere interpretation to systematic, argumentative evaluation. Exposure to interfaith discourse, dialogical interaction, and the use of textual references can trigger cognitive dissonance that encourages deep reflection and the formation of self-awareness. In this context, the decision to convert does not arise spontaneously, but is the result of a rational process oriented toward the search for epistemic consistency.

In addition, conversion also has an impact on the reconstruction of the subject's identity and authority. Changes in beliefs not only shift the individual's position in the spiritual dimension, but also in social and symbolic structures, thus demanding a continuous process of negotiating meaning and legitimacy. This confirms that religious conversion is a multidimensional process that involves cognitive, communicative, and structural aspects simultaneously.

This study reinforces the view that religious conversion results from an interaction between the production of meaning, rational evaluation, and communication dynamics in a broader social context. This conclusion also highlights the importance of communication in an integrative approach to understanding belief transformation.

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