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Psychosocial determinants of religious/denominational conversion: a person – environment fit perspective

Abstract

Religious or denominational conversion is a complex process that involves various psychosocial factors. One theoretical framework that has been utilized to comprehend the determinants of religious conversion is the person – environment fit model. This study examines the role of personal and socio-cultural factors that play a significant role in conversion processes within a person – environment fit perspective. The analysis demonstrates that individuals are more likely to convert to a new religion or denomination when they perceive a good fit between their personal and socio-cultural characteristics and the characteristics of the religious or denominational environment. Personal factors that may influence the decision to convert include: personality traits, values, beliefs, and thinking styles, while socio-cultural factors comprise: socialization, familial and cultural norms and standards, and social integration processes. Moreover, both categories of factors interact in the conversion process, influencing potential decisions to convert to varying degrees. When an individual's religious beliefs, values, and norms align with those of a newly encountered group, they are more likely to identify with the group's goals and mission.

Keywords: religion, conversion, religious changes, person – environment approach, functional fit.

Psychospołeczne determinanty konwersji religijnej/wyznaniowej: perspektywa dopasowania osoba – środowisko

Abstrakt

Konwersja religijna lub wyznaniowa jest złożonym procesem, który obejmuje różne czynniki psychospołeczne. Jednym z podejść teoretycznych, które mogą zostać wykorzystane do zrozumienia determinantów konwersji religijnej, jest model dopasowania osoba – środowisko. W niniejszym opracowaniu zbadano rolę czynników osobistych i społeczno-kulturowych, które odgrywają istotną rolę w procesach konwersji w perspektywie dopasowania osoba – środowisko. Analiza wykazała, że jednostki są bardziej

skłonne do przejścia na nową religię lub wyznanie, gdy dostrzegają dobre dopasowanie między swoimi cechami osobistymi i społeczno-kulturowymi a cechami środowiska religijnego lub wyznaniowego. Czynniki osobiste, które mogą wpływać na decyzję o konwersji, obejmują: cechy osobowości, wartości, przekonania i style myślenia, natomiast wśród czynników społeczno-kulturowych można wymienić: socjalizację, normy i standardy rodzinne i kulturowe oraz procesy integracji społecznej. Ponadto obie kategorie czynników oddziałują na siebie w procesie konwersji, wpływając w różnym stopniu na potencjalne decyzje o konwersji. Kiedy przekonania religijne, wartości i normy jednostki są zgodne z przekonaniami, wartościami i normami nowo poznanej grupy, jest bardziej prawdopodobne, że będzie ona identyfikować się z celami i misją grupy.

Słowa kluczowe: religia, konwersja, zmiany religijne, podejście osoba – środowisko, dopasowanie funkcjonalne.

Religious/denominational conversion has been occurring throughout human history. It is a complex phenomenon that has been the subject of extensive research in the field of theology, religious studies, and social sciences. Each discipline has attempted to disentangle causes and determinants of such decisions. In fact, the reasons why people change their religion are complex and multifaceted. People have converted from one religion to another for various reasons, ranging from personal experiences to ideological differences[1]. In addition, they tend to interact with each other, leading to profound changes in one's religious beliefs and behaviour. This paper argues that a better understanding of these factors can help individuals and religious institutions develop more inclusive and welcoming communities.

1. The applicability of a person – environment (P–E) fit model to conversion

Religious conversion is defined as the process by which an individual commits to the beliefs of a new religious tradition and moves away from previously held religious beliefs[2]. Research on changing religious/denominational beliefs can profit from using models that examine factors responsible for changing human attitudes and behaviour. One of the useful theoretical perspectives is offered by the person – environment (P–E) fit model that is used in psychology and organisational behaviour to understand how individuals interact with their

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[1] Álvaro Castaño, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Manuel Moyano. 2022. "Cult conversion from the perspective of families: Implications for prevention and psychological intervention". Psychology of Religion and Spirituality 14 (1): 148–149.

[2] Daniel W. Snook, Michael J. Williams, John G. Horgan. 2019. "Issues in the sociology and psychology of religious conversion". Pastoral Psychology 68: 224.

environment[3]. This approach originates from Gestalt psychology, more specifically from the writings of Kurt Levin[4].

The P–E fit model proposes that people's behaviour, attitudes, and performance are a function of how well they fit with their environment. In other words, when there is a good fit between a person and their environment, they are likely to experience positive outcomes, such as job satisfaction, while a poor fit can lead to negative outcomes, such as stress or burnout[5]. Strain or anxiety are generated when there is a discrepancy between the person's motives or needs and the environment's provisions, or between the environment's demands and the person's abilities to meet them. The subjective fit between the above-mentioned factors is conducive to the individual's well-being as it determines how successfully people can adjust to the environment[6].

In terms of psychosocial mechanisms, the P–E fit model highlights the importance of considering the fit between a person and their environment when understanding their behaviour and performance. It emphasises that individuals are not independent entities, but rather are shaped and influenced by the social and physical contexts in which they operate. The P–E fit model is based on the concept of 'congruence' or the degree to which an individual characteristics match the demands of their environment. This includes both the physical and social aspects of the environment, such as job requirements, culture, and interpersonal relationships[7]. Therefore, societies and individuals should strive to create an environment that fosters a good fit to promote positive outcomes for both the individual and the organisation.

The P–E fit model can be a useful framework for understanding the process of religious conversion, as it highlights the importance of finding a good fit between an individual's beliefs and values and the religious environment they are a part of. Religious conversion can be seen as a process of seeking a better fit between an individual's beliefs and values and the religious environment they find themselves in[8]. The model suggests that when there is a good fit, individuals experience positive

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[3] Amy L. Kristof-Brown, Ryan D. Zimmerman, Erin C. Johnson 2005. "Consequences of individuals' fit at work: A meta-analysis of person–job, person–organization, person–group, and person–supervisor fit". Personnel Psychology 58 (2): 282–283.

[4] Por. Kurt Levin. 1936. *Principles of Topological Psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 31–33.

[5] Jeffrey R. Edwards, Robert D. Caplan, Richard Van Harrison. 1998. Person-environment fit theory: Conceptual foundations, empirical evidence, and directions for future research. In *Theories of Organizational Stress*. Ed. Carry Cooper, 65. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

[6] Nicolas Goetz, Andreas Wald. 2021. "Employee performance in temporary organizations: The effects of person-environment fit and temporariness on task performance and innovative performance". European Management Review 18 (2): 38.

[7] Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, Johnson 2005. "Consequences of individuals' fit at work: A meta-analysis of person–job, person–organization, person–group, and person–supervisor fit", 285.

[8] Bruce Hunsberger, Luke Brown. 1984. "Religious socialization, apostasy, and the impact of family background". Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 23 (4): 472; Snook, Williams,

outcomes, such as increased well-being and a sense of belonging, while a poor fit can lead to negative outcomes such as cognitive dissonance and social isolation. In terms of conversion, an individual who values community, ritual, and tradition may find a good fit in a religious group that emphasises these aspects. On the other hand, an individual who values individualism and intellectual exploration may find a better fit in a more liberal religious group or a non-religious environment.

Research has demonstrated that the P–E fit model applies to religious conversion across different religious traditions. The assumption lies in the observation that values and traits have different patterns of associations with religiosity[9], and consequently, the extent to which values fit in with individuals' religiosity can determine their well-being. Sussan Namini and colleagues showed how the P–E fit theory can explain relationships between need-supplies fit and well-being in the perspective of conversions to new religious movements (NRMs)[10]. Regression analyses have revealed that well-being was related to the interaction between needs and supplies. Specifically, the examination of autonomy and relatedness showed that well-being and mental health decreased when the amount of the need provided exceeded the level required. These findings indicate that if a religious group bestows to much 'care' upon the convert than he/she needs, conflicts are likely to arise, which, in turn, can be detrimental to the convert's well-being. Therefore, there seems to be an optimal level of care/attention provided by a religious group for a potential convert's well-being.

The P–E fit model can also help explain why some individuals experience multiple religious conversions throughout their lifetime. Therefore, we can formulate the concept of person – religion fit that can be conducive to understanding the psychological determinants and consequences of conversion[11]. For example, an individual may initially find a good fit in a particular religious group but over time, their personal beliefs and values may change, leading to a poor fit and a search for a new religious environment that better aligns with their current beliefs and values[12]. On the other hand, as one's personal beliefs and values can

Horgan. 2019. „Issues in the sociology and psychology of religious conversion", 237.

   [9] Sonia Roccas, Lilach Sagiv, Shalom H. Schwartz, Ariel Knafo. 2002. "The Big Five personality factors and personal values". Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 28 (2002): 798–799.

   [10] Sussan Namini, Sebastian Murken. 2009. "Self-chosen involvement in new religious movements (NRMs): Well-being and mental health from a longitudinal perspective". Mental Health, Religion and Culture 12 (6): 582; Sussan Namini, Claudia Appel, Ralph Jürgensen, Sebastian Murken. 2010. "How is Well-Being Related to Membership in New Religious Movements? An Application of Person–Environment Fit Theory". Applied Psychology 59 (2): 198.

   [11] Raymond F. Paloutzian, Sebastian Murken, Heinz Streib, Sussan Rößler-Namini. 2013. Conversion, deconversion, and spiritual transformation: A multilevel interdisciplinary view. In *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*. Ed. Raymond F. Paloutzian, Crystal L. Park, 405. New York – London: The Guilford Press.

   [12] Rodney Stark. 1996. "Why religious movements succeed or fail: A revised general model". Journal of Contemporary Religion 11 (2): 142–143.

change over time[13], the person can seek religious groups that align with new beliefs and values, and that when there is a good fit between an individual and their group, there is a higher likelihood of positive outcomes such as personal satisfaction, well-being, and a sense of belonging. Conversely, when there is a poor fit, individuals who have joined a religious group may experience negative outcomes such as cognitive dissonance, social isolation, and decreased well-being, which prompts them to search for another group (i.e. the next conversion). Naturally, these processes do not occur 'overnight', but are spread out over time.

2. Personal factors as potential determinants

One aspect of religious conversion that has received significant attention in the literature is the role of personal factors. Personal factors refer to individual-level characteristics, such as personality traits, values, beliefs, thinking styles, and attitudes that influence an individual's decision to convert to a new religion. Being deeply embedded in the psychological make-up of individuals, they tend to influence all kinds of important decisions, including those related to the religious sphere.

Personality is one of the most studied personal factors in the context of religious conversion. It reflects the ways in which people think, feel, and act; while differing between individuals, personality remains stable within individuals as they age[14]. Researchers have identified various personality traits that may influence an individual's likelihood of converting to a new religion. A study conducted on members of Hare Krishna in the United States by using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator found that two thirds of the members obtained high scores in the 'sensory, thinking, and judging' category, which reflects a 'sensate' personality type that describes a person as someone driven by strong cravings for sensory and sensual satisfaction[15]. The authors concluded that the Hare Krishna movement tends to appeal to individuals who have a certain kind of sensate personality.

Other studies have confirmed an important role of personality traits in conversion. Daniel W. Snook and his colleagues found that individuals who are high in openness to experience and low in neuroticism are more likely to convert to

[13] Aasha I. Hoogland. 2015. "Continuity of change: The dynamic of beliefs, values, and the aging experience". Journal of Aging Studies 32: 37.

[14] Brent W. Roberts, Hee J. Yoon. 2022. "Personality psychology". Annual Review of Psychology 73: 489.

[15] Por. Tommy H. Poling, Frank J. Kenney. 1986. *The Hare Krishna character type: A study in sensate personality*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 43–45.

a new religion[16]. Examining people who converted to Christianity, Peter Halama and Maria Laćna found converts perceiving themselves to be higher in extroversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness and lower in neuroticism following their conversion[17]. However, as the study was based on a retrospective approach, it is likely that converts' recollections can be impacted by the need to view their new life in positive terms. Thus, it appears that individuals characterised by certain personality types may search for those groups that attract and strengthen those types within the group's cultural patterns.

Another individual factor that can contribute to multiple religious conversions is personal growth and development. As individuals experience new life events and engage in personal reflection, their beliefs and values may evolve over time, leading them to question their existing religious affiliation and to seek out new religious communities that align with their current beliefs and values[18]. Personal values which are rather stable broad life goals that are important to people in their lives and guide their perception, judgements, and behaviour, are also an important personal factor influencing religious conversion. A meta-analysis of 92 studies revealed that values such as self-transcendence, universalism, and benevolence are positively associated with religiousness and spirituality[19]. These values reflect a concern for the welfare of others, a sense of connectedness with others, and a desire for personal growth and self-actualisation, which may be important motivators for religious conversion.

In addition to values, beliefs and attitudes are also significant personal factors for religious conversion. Namini and Murken found that individuals who are dissatisfied with their current beliefs or religious practices may be more likely to seek out alternative belief systems[20]. Similarly, Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson demonstrated that individuals who perceive a high level of fit between their values and beliefs and those of their religious organisation are more likely to be committed to the organisation and less likely to leave[21].

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[16] Snook, Williams, Horgan. 2019. "Issues in the sociology and psychology of religious conversion", 237.

[17] Peter Halama, Maria Laćna. 2011. "Personality change following religious conversion: Perceptions of converts and their close acquaintances". Mental Health, Religion and Culture 14 (8): 766.

[18] Frederick T. L. Leong, Zornitsa Kalibatseva. 2011. *Cross-cultural barriers to mental health services in the United States*. Cerebrum: The Dana Forum on Brain Science, 9.

[19] Laura Parks-Leduc, Gilad Feldman, Anat Bardi. 2015. "Personality traits and personal values: A meta-analysis". Personality and Social Psychology Review 19 (1): 7.

[20] Namini, Murken. 2009. "Self-chosen involvement in new religious movements (NRMs): Well-being and mental health from a longitudinal perspective", 582.

[21] Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, Johnson 2005. "Consequences of individuals' fit at work: A meta-analysis of person–job, person–organization, person–group, and person–supervisor fit", 284.

The main reason why values, beliefs and attitudes may influence the decision to convert may lie in their significant power to influence behaviour. Numerous studies in social psychology have shown that attitudes and values have an impact on our behaviour, emotional reactions, and the way we perceive the reality around us[22]. The patterns of beliefs and values held by individuals determine how decisions are made and actions performed. Attitudes influence the selectivity of the information we perceive, thus ignoring other information that may also be useful. In addition, attitudes determine the inference and memory of certain information, for example if we like a person, we are inclined to process any information about them in a biased way.

Personal experiences, such as transformative events, childhood and familial experiences, life-changing crises, or spiritual awakenings, are often cited as significant factors in religious conversion[23]. Individuals who experience profound religious experiences are more likely to change their religion than those who have not. Such experiences may lead individuals to question their existing beliefs, and to seek out new religious affiliations that offer a sense of meaning, purpose, and direction in their lives. Kenneth I. Pargament and Annette Mahoney claim that individuals who experienced a religious conversion often did so after undergoing a significant life event, such as the death of a loved one or a traumatic experience[24]. Such experiences may lead individuals to question their beliefs and seek out new spiritual perspectives that offer a sense of comfort and solace. This mechanism may be related to psychological distress. Some individuals may turn to religion as a coping mechanism during times of stress or crisis, but as their circumstances change, they may find that their religious affiliation no longer provides the support they need. This can lead them to seek out new religious communities that offer more relevant forms of support and guidance.

In addition, early developmental influences tinged with trauma (e.g. the divorce of parents, child abuse) and specific childrearing configurations (e.g. a dominant mother and submissive father) were systematically shown to prompt conversion to religious groups. Research conducted on the members of New Religious Movements demonstrated that their fathers were frequently absent, unavailable, or actively rejecting, and their relationships with their mothers were problematic

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[22] Por. Millissa F. Cheung, Wai Ming To. 2019. "An extended model of value-attitude-behavior to explain Chinese consumers' green purchase behavior". Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services 50: 150–151; Bas Verkplanken, Sheina Orbell. 2022. "Attitudes, habits, and behavior change". Annual Review of Psychology 73: 349–350.

[23] Paloutzian, Murken, Streib, Rößler-Namini. 2013. Conversion, deconversion, and spiritual transformation: A multilevel interdisciplinary view, 404.

[24] Kenneth I. Pargament, Annette Mahoney. 2005. Discovering and conserving the sacred. In Handbook of positive psychology. Ed. Rick C. Snyder, Shane J. Lopez, 649. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

and complex[25]. Similarly, those who showed an interest in new forms of religiosity or became involved in new religious groups were often characterised by high levels of insecure attachment in their life histories[26]. This may be because early childhood experiences, especially those with strong negative elements, strongly influence patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving in future years.

Thinking styles can play a significant role in religious conversion. Research has shown that individuals with certain thinking styles are more likely to prefer a specific set of religious beliefs[27]. Individuals who are characterised by high openness to experience, a personality trait related to curiosity, creativity, and willingness to explore new ideas, can be more likely to convert to a new religion as a result of their greater tendency to explore different religious beliefs and practices. Therefore, they are more receptive to the spiritual experiences and emotions associated with religious conversion[28]. People who rely more on intuition and gut feelings when making decisions, possess high levels of imaginative thinking, and engage in reflective thinking, which involves critical analysis and evaluation of information. Therefore, they may be more likely to convert to a new religion.

The underlying reason seems to be that such people are less likely to rely solely on logical reasoning when making decisions about their beliefs and practices and thus may be more open to the emotional and spiritual experiences associated with religious conversion (i.e. they are intuitive thinkers). In addition, they may be more drawn to the symbolic and metaphorical aspects of religious practices and beliefs, and find the stories and myths that resonate in a new religion particularly compelling (i.e. they are imaginative thinkers). They also discover through critical analysis and evaluation of information that the beliefs and practices of a particular religion align with their values and personal beliefs (i.e. they are reflective thinkers)[29]. These thinkers may be more likely to evaluate the pros and cons of a new religion, and consider the implications of adopting new beliefs and practices as potentially viable.

The way in which people think about their religion can also affect the conversion process. Examining different religious thinking styles, Dirk Hutsebaut

[25] Douglas E. Cowan. 2014. Conversion to New Religious Movements. In *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*. Ed. Lewis R. Rambo, Charles E. Farhadian, 691. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[26] Coralie Buxant, Vassilis Saroglou, Stefania Casalfiore, Louis-Léon Christians. 2007. "Cognitive and emotional characteristics of New Religious Movement members: New questions and data on the mental health issue". Mental Health, Religion and Culture 10 (3): 236.

[27] Kibeom Lee, Michael C. Ashton, Yannick Griep, Michael Edmonds. 2018. "Personality, religion, and politics: An investigation in 33 countries". European Journal of Personality 32 (2): 101.

[28] Robert R. Mccrae. 1999. "Mainstream personality psychology and the study of religion". Journal of Personality 67 (6): 1214.

[29] Por. Hasan G. Bahçekapili, Onurcan Yilmaz. 2017. "The relation between different types of religiosity and analytic cognitive style". Personality and Individual Differences 117: 270.

proposed the concept of post-critical beliefs and corresponding religious thinking styles that individuals adopt after they have undertaken critical thinking and reflection on their existing beliefs[30]. These styles are: (1) orthodoxy which is characterised by thinking about religious issues in a literal way while taking into account the presence of transcendence. Within this attitude, people interpret religious content in an inflexible, closed-minded, and dogmatic fashion; (2) external critique which is defined by literal thinking about religious topics, but at the same by a rejection of existence of transcendence. Within this style individuals frequently seek answers to their questions not in religious content, but in the humanities and sciences, in which most hypotheses can be proven empirically; (3) relativism which is expressed in the rejection of a transcendent reality while believing that religious issues may have hidden, symbolic meaning. Individuals who prefer this attitude may have extensive knowledge of religion, and even be fascinated by it on an intellectual level, yet, they do not show any personal involvement in religious practices and worship; (4) second naiveté which is categorised by the recognition of transcendence and the concomitant belief that religious content can be interpreted in a symbolic and personally meaningful way. Such people accept the existence of a transcendent reality and process religious content in a more symbolic, open and tolerant fashion.

Given the content-based scope of post-critical beliefs, it is highly likely that they may be a key factor in religious conversion. A preference for a particular style of thinking about religion, for instance an orthodox approach to thinking about religion versus a relational and critical analysis of religious dogmas, may lead to gradual changes in previously held beliefs associated with the decision to convert[31]. While in the former case we will see a more integrated and holistic belief system that does not challenge the currently professed religion, in the latter case critical thinking may lead individuals to adopt new religious beliefs that are more in line with their personal experiences and values. The analysis of religious content thus often depends on the intellectual capacity in which that content is analysed and reinterpreted. As a consequence, religious thinking styles can impact an individual's decision to convert to a new religion, by influencing their religious attitudes and perspectives, reliance on previously held beliefs, and cognitive flexibility.

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[30] Dirk Hutsebaut. 1996. "Post-Critical Belief: A new approach of the religious attitude problem". Journal of Empirical Theology 9: 55–56; Bart Duriez, Johnny R.J. Fontaine, Dirk Hutsebaut. 2000. "A further elaboration of the post-critical belief scale: Evidence for the existence of four different approaches to religion in Flanders-Belgium". Psychologica Belgica 40: 154.

[31] Bart Duriez, Jessie Dezutter, Bart Neyrinck, Dirk Hutsebaut. 2007. "An introduction to the Post-Critical Belief Scale: Internal structure and external relationships". Psyke and Logos 28 (2): 769; Piotr Szydłowski. "Dominant styles of thinking about religion". Psychology of Religion and Spirituality 10 (1): 99.

The role of personal factors as potential determinants in changing religion/denomination may be better understood within a person – environment fit perspective, specifically, the notion of person–religion fit. People who have negative or traumatic family experiences can find an explanation for their internal conflicts in a religious group that is able to provide some form of ideal family, whereas others can choose groups that offer a safe and therapeutic atmosphere. In that case, individuals strive to find a religious environment that fosters a good fit for their personal needs in order to obtain positive outcomes for both themselves and the group[32]. Therefore, people seek groups that offer an emotional relationship with a religious figure as a substitute for deficits experienced in their early childhood. By doing it, they can establish unconscious attachment with an important father-like figure. Another example can concern individuals who have intellectual needs; they are likely to seek religious groups that could provide compelling rational arguments fulfilling their cognitive demands. If individuals experience positive psychological outcomes in well-being and self-fulfilment, we have a good fit in terms of conversion. It leads to harmonious and affirmative relationships between the individual and the religious group that he/she has joined. The subjective fit between one's personal needs and the religious group's opportunities (i.e. environmental supplies).

In conclusion, personal factors play an important role in religious conversion. Personality traits, values, beliefs, and thinking styles all influence an individual's decision to convert to a new religion. Personal experiences, especially those which are connected to trauma and high anxiety may also contribute to changes occurring within one's religious beliefs and behaviour. Understanding these personal factors can provide valuable insights for religious leaders, counsellors, and researchers who seek to facilitate or understand the process of religious conversion.

3. Socio-cultural experiences as contributing factors

Social and cultural factors can also influence religious/denominational conversions[33]. This is due to the important function that socio-cultural factors play in thinking religious behaviour. One of the important factors leading to religious conversion can be ideological differences between an individual's personal beliefs and the teachings of their religion. The role of ideological differences in religious conversion refers to the idea that individuals may be attracted to a particular religion be-

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[32] Paloutzian, Murken, Streib, Rößler-Namini. 2013. Conversion, deconversion, and spiritual transformation: A multilevel interdisciplinary view, 404.

[33] Por. Lynne Taylor. 2021. "A multidimensional approach to understanding religious conversion". Pastoral Psychology 70 (1): 34–35.

cause it aligns with their ideological beliefs and values[34]. Ideological differences can include political views, moral beliefs, and attitudes towards certain social issues. As individuals develop and mature, their values, beliefs, and worldviews may alter, leading to a reassessment of their religious beliefs. This may lead them to seek out a new religious affiliation that is more congruent with their personal values and beliefs[35]. In that case, a level of ideological congruence may predispose an individual to start thinking about potential changes of religion or denomination.

Research has shown that individuals who undergo religious conversion often experience a change in their ideological beliefs, such as a shift in their attitudes towards social issues. For example, the way in which religious individuals perceive contradictory political information can determine how much they tend to adopt more conservative political attitudes than they would, otherwise[36]. Political congruence versus political incongruence expressed by a person will thus determine the character of religious beliefs, and potentially a likelihood of conversion. A study conducted on the relationship between political radicalization and conversion demonstrated that perceiving social injustices and experiencing critical incidents in social interactions can be motivations for pushing individuals towards radicalisation and religious conversion[37]. While exploring and analysing the various ideological options, an individual may come to the conclusion that some new beliefs no longer fit with the religion they adhere to and which they would like to change. Consequently, the person will engage in a search for a new religion that will help clarify ideological discrepancies and provide a coherent set of worldviews.

Socialisation, which describes the process by which individuals learn and internalise cultural norms, values, and beliefs, is another significant psychosocial factor in religious conversion. The family, community, and peer group are primary agents of socialisation that shape an individual's religious identity[38]. However, as individuals grow and develop, they may encounter new religious beliefs and practices that are more congruent with their personal values and beliefs. This may lead to a change in religious affiliation as they seek out a new community of believers who better reflect their worldview.

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[34] Snook, Williams, Horgan. 2019. "Issues in the sociology and psychology of religious conversion", 233.

[35] Henri Gooren. 2010. *Religious conversion and disaffiliation: Tracing patterns of change in faith practices*. New York: Springer, 23.

[36] Ariel Malka, Yphtach Lelkes, Sanjay Srivastava, Adam B. Cohen, Dale T. Miller. 2012. "The association of religiosity and political conservatism: The role of political engagement". Political Psychology 33 (2): 275–299.

[37] Neil Ferguson, Eve Binks. "Understanding radicalization and engagement in terrorism through religious conversion motifs". Journal of Strategic Security 8 (1–2): 23.

[38] Gabriella Pusztai, Zsuzsanna Demeter-Karászi. 2019. "Analysis of religious socialization based on interviews conducted with young adults". Religions 10 (6): 2–3.

Having examined connections between ethno-religious socialisation and conversion among British, Muslims Ryiaz Timol indicated that conversion depends on childhood primary socialisation[39]. What plays a significant role in this process is the content of the meaning-system embedded in subjective consciousness during childhood, which must be substantially altered or displaced in order to lead to changes in religious beliefs and behaviour. Describing the process of conversion, Timol states: "This may cause a rupture in terms of the individual's self-conceptualisation of identity and the efficacy of such a conversion often depends, in practice, upon the cultivation of strong personal bonds forged with new significant others who mediate the 'plausibility structure' of the receiving group"[40]. Thus, an individual may convert to a particular religion as a result of the socialisation processes that occur in a particular religious environment at a certain stage of development. As people become more integrated into their community, they may feel pressure to conform to its religious practices and beliefs, which could lead them to convert to the new religion.

Another example can refer to conversion as a result of marrying into a family with a different religious background. People who marry a person of a different religion enter a new family environment where they encounter different religious values, norms, and standards. As they become more integrated into their spouse's family and community, they may feel pressure to conform to their spouse's religious practices and beliefs, which may lead them to convert to a new religion. Research conducted among conservative Muslims communities revealed that for non-Muslim spouses conversion is perceived as something 'natural' due to the fact that 'Islam is humanity's destiny'[41]. This may be partly due to the specific characteristics of the community (which adheres to conservative and hermetic values and religious norms), and partly due to the expectations of the spouse's family towards the new spouse. A study on the determinants and consequences of marriages between Jews and non-Jews shows that conversion causes the effect of unifying the group identification of both partners. From the point of view of psychological mechanisms, which spouse has adopted the group identity of which is of little importance. Yet, from the perspective of a given group it is significant whether conversion occurs into the given group or outside it[42]. It bears

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[39] Riyaz Timol. 2020. "Ethno-religious socialisation, national culture and the social construction of British Muslim identity". Contemporary Islam 14 (3): 342–343.

[40] Timol. 2020. "Ethno-religious socialisation, national culture and the social construction of British Muslim identity", 342.

[41] Helene Thibault. 2021. "«Are You Married?»: Gender and faith in political ethnographic research". Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 50 (3): 408.

[42] Sergio DellaPergola. 2017. Jewish out-marriage: A global perspective. In *Jewish intermarriage around the world*. Ed. Sergio DellaPergola, Shulamit Reinharz, 20. London – New York: Routledge.

important implications for the social consequences of conversion as in the latter case, the pressure to change religion may be stronger.

Social integration is a strong factor that determines conversion processes. From a psychological perspective, the sense of belonging to a social group or community is a fundamental human need that is often met through religion[43]. Individuals who feel disconnected from their families, friends, or society as a whole may turn to religion as a way to find a sense of belonging and social support. Research on attachment found that individuals who experienced a religious conversion often did so because they felt a sense of disconnection or dissatisfaction with their existing religious community. To gain a sense of security and belonging to the group, they decided to seek out a new religious affiliation that offered a more supportive and inclusive community, in terms of meeting their social and emotional needs[44].

In addition, individuals who migrate to a new country may also experience religious conversions as they adapt to the cultural and social norms of their new community. They may initially adhere to their own religion, but as they become more integrated into their new community, they may search for a new religious community that provides a sense of belonging and cultural identity[45]. The mixing of different cultures and religions can lead to mutual influence and exchange of religious concepts. In addition, people coming out of a religious culture, for example due to a change of residence or education, may experience conflicts and incompatibilities between their beliefs and their new environment, which may lead to a change in religious beliefs. The above findings suggest a connection between social factors related to family and cultural settings, and religious changes leading to conversion.

Examining the role of social integration in conversion, Daniel W. Snook and colleagues distinguished two levels of analysis: (1) agency assigned to converts, and (2) social integration[46]. The first emphasises the role taken by converts in their own conversion. Within this category, converts are described as individuals who actively participate in their conversion. This includes searching for meaning in religious beliefs, experimenting with new belief systems,

[43] Muhammad Saud, Asia Ashfaq, Ansar Abbas, Qaisar Khalid Mahmood. 2020. Seeking social support through Religion, Psychological wellbeing and Social capital: A Global Survey on Coronavirus situational stress and coping strategies (25.04.2023). https://assets.researchsquare.com/files/rs-67434/v1_covered.pdf?c=1631841135.

[44] Pehr Granqvist. 2003. "Attachment theory and religious conversions: A review and a resolution of the classic and contemporary paradigm chasm". Review of Religious Research 45 (2): 179–180.

[45] Szabolcs Kéri, Christina Sleiman. 2017. "Religious conversion to Christianity in Muslim refugees in Europe". Archive for the Psychology of Religion 39 (3): 284.

[46] Snook, Williams, Horgan. 2019. "Issues in the sociology and psychology of religious conversion", 231.

cooperating with group members and focussing on personal decisions in religious matters.

The latter reflects the level of social integration which in addition to internal psychological factors predominantly assesses external social factors. Within this approach, conversion occurs at an intra-individual level, in which the factors finally responsible for the conversion process lie in the individual, namely their religious beliefs, personality traits, and cognitive styles. Conversion also occurs at the inter-individual level, in which the main driving force includes converts' social interactions, social networks, group pressures, and social expectations. Both intrapersonal and interpersonal factors are present in the conversion process, influencing, to varying degrees, the decisions taken by individuals.

Socialisation theories argue that converts are only partially active agents as they have not chosen to become part of the group's social system to which they belong[47]. From this perspective, as they tend to retain early psychological preferences for their belief structures. The desire to change the religion may arise when the individual does not encounter other adults belonging to the religious group which share the same religious beliefs learned as a child. In such a case, the individual may 'oversocialise', and convert to a group that shares some religious similarity with his or her childhood religious system, but differs from it in significant ways. This approach emphasises the important role of social integration in conversion processes, yet, it does not undermine the individual's ability to make conscious personal choices.

The role of social factors in conversion can be better comprehended within the framework of person – environment (P–E) fit model which postulates a dynamic interaction between personal and environmental factors. The model suggests that when there is a high level of compatibility or fit between individuals and their environment, they are more likely to experience positive outcomes[48]. This is because a high level of fit means that individuals perceive their environment to be congruent with their needs, preferences, and abilities. In that case, the environment has the potential to influence someone's decisions.

In the case of conversion, when a person experiences strong unfulfilled psychological and religious needs, and encounters an environment that is able to meet these needs, then the likelihood of conversion increases. For example, when a person's religious beliefs, values, and norms align with a newly en-

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[47] Por. Thomas Luckmann. 2023. *The invisible religion: The problem of religion in modern society*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 20–21.

[48] Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, Johnson 2005. 'Consequences of individuals' fit at work: A meta-analysis of person–job, person–organization, person–group, and person–supervisor fit", 283.

countered group, they are more likely to identify with the group's goals and mission[49]. This, in turn, can lead to greater interest in the group's religious identity and potential decisions about conversion. On the other hand, when there is a low level of fit between individuals and the new group, they are more likely to experience negative outcomes. As a consequence, they may feel disengaged and dissatisfied with the group's proposed ideas and beliefs, which is unlikely to lead to a conversion decision.

This interpretation highlights the importance of considering both the individual and the environment in understanding behaviour and outcomes in conversion. By appealing to the person's expectations and needs, social factors can influence changes in religious beliefs, as religion is often considered an integral part of culture and society and people frequently form their religious beliefs based on the values, norms, and expectations of society that they assimilate throughout their lives. Therefore, changes in the surrounding culture and society can affect individual religious beliefs.

In summary, the reasons for religious conversions are complex and multifaceted, involving a range of individual and socio-cultural factors. The P–E fit model is a useful framework for understanding the antecedents and mechanisms of conversion, and has implications for both researchers and practitioners in fields such as the psychology of religion and social psychology. The proposed theoretical model can be applied not only in the religious conversion concerning new religious movements (which is alluded to in the article), but also in numerous Protestant denominations and in natural religions with their specific and very diverse objects of worship, i.e. polytheistic, henotheistic, pantheistic religions. In addition, the above model assumes free choice on the part of the convert in the activity of changing the denomination of a religious denomination. However, there may also be changes of denomination under the influence of recruitment through manipulation especially in the context of new religious movements (sects). Manipulative strategies lack criticality and incapacitate decision-making on the part of the potential convert. The article shows that individuals may be attracted to a particular religion because it aligns with their personality traits, values, beliefs, and thinking styles. Additionally, religious conversion can be also motivated by such factors as socialisation, familial, and cultural norms and standards, and social integration processes. Understanding these factors can help shed light on the dynamics of religious conversion, and how it relates to personal growth and development, coping with psychological distress, and adapting to new social and cultural environments.

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[49] Taylor. 2021. "A multidimensional approach to understanding religious conversion", 35–37.

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