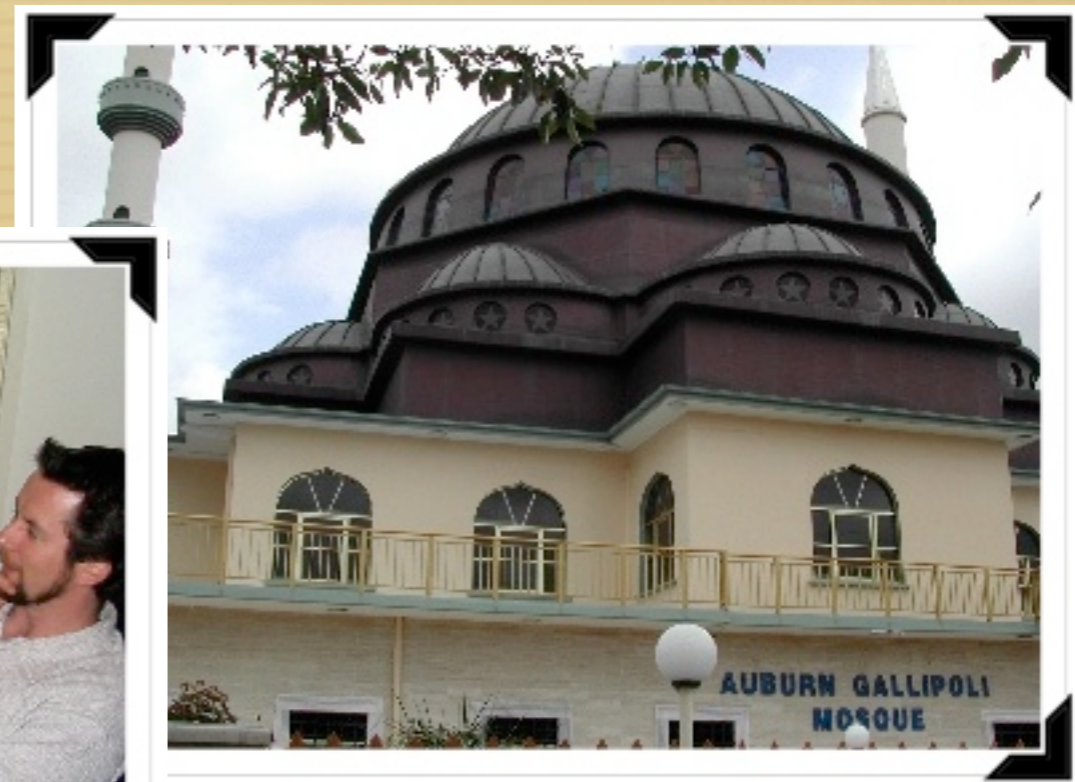


Becoming Muslim

An analysis of the process of converting to Islam in an Australian context



Introduction

- ~ Literature on conversion largely about conversion to Christianity or pre-modern historical spread of Islam
- ~ No reliable statistics on number of Australians converting to Islam
- ~ This study is an analysis of conversion testimonies based on process frameworks



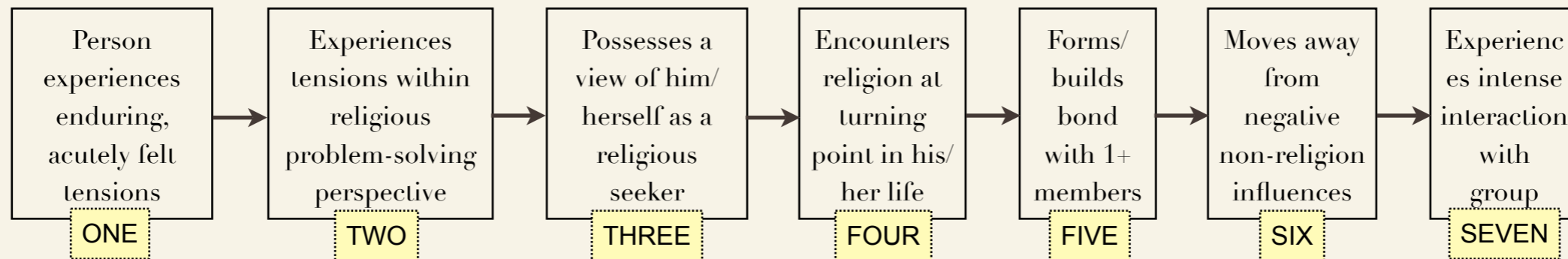
Why?

- ~ I undertook formal studies of Islam and the Arabic language from 1995
- ~ ‘Dabbled’ with Islam for a few years, until in August 1999 I fully embraced my Muslim identity

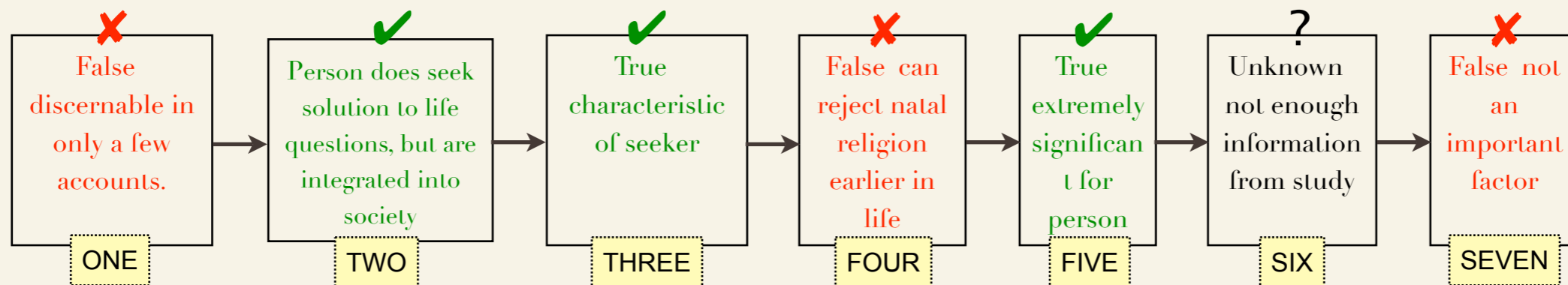


- ~ I am interested in how Australian Muslims are developing an Australian experience of Islam

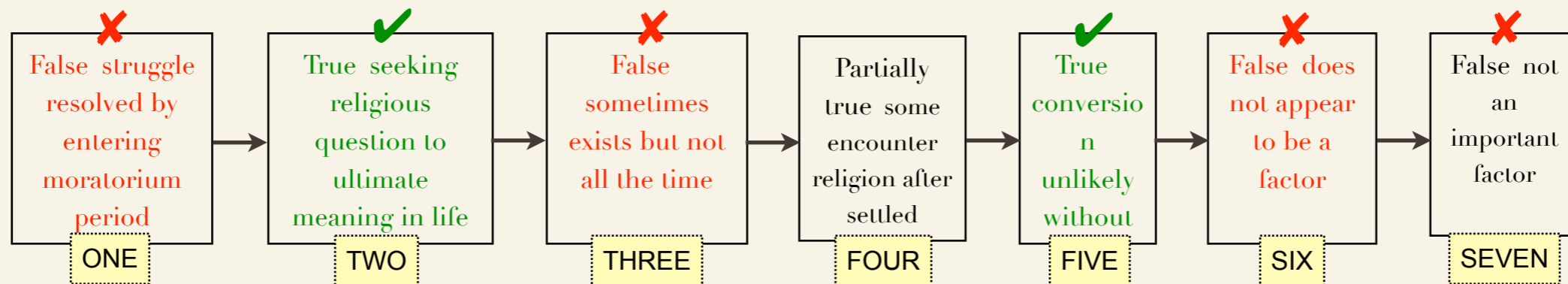
Previous Research



~ Lofland & Stark (1965) "Becoming a World-Saver"



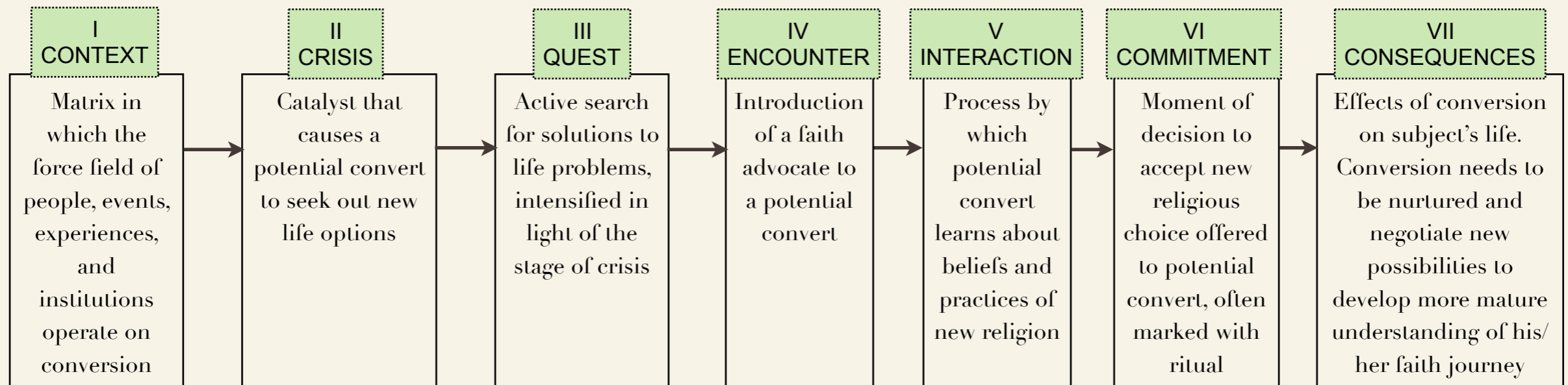
~ Poston (1992) *Islamic Da'wah in the West*



~ Köse (1996) *Conversion to Islam*

L. Rambo Framework

~ Rambo (1993) *Understanding Religious Conversion*



Context for Australian converts

~ Some raised with negative impressions of Islam and Muslims:

- ✦ Yusef told as child that Muslims kill Christians
- ✦ Jenny and Zakiyyah mentioned their negative perceptions being drawn from the media, among other sources
- ✦ Jenny said she thought: “a Muslim male was one who beat his wife, killed female babies and was a terrorist in his spare time”

~ Others grew up unaware of Islam and Muslims:

- ✦ Aminah realised that Muslim history had been absent from her school education
- ✦ Aisha encountered followers of non-Christian religions, including Islam, when she attended a private college, but did not learn anything about the religion until studying at University

“I couldn’t focus on my studies. In my mind I kept thinking, ‘Who is Mohammed? Why hadn’t I learned about him at school?’” ~Aisha

Crisis for Australian converts

Rambo's catalysts for conversion:

1. mystical experiences
2. near-death experiences
3. illness and healing
4. ennui
5. desire for transcendence
6. altered states of consciousness
7. protean selfhood
8. pathology
9. apostasy
10. externally stimulated crises

~ Crises reported in conversion testimonies:

Externally stimulated crises	Mentioned in 10 accounts
Ennui	Mentioned in 5 accounts
Illness and healing	Mentioned in 5 accounts
Apostasy	Mentioned in 2 accounts
Desire for transcendence	Mentioned in 2 accounts

Quest for Australian converts

~ Half of the testimonies analysed mentioned a moratorium period:

- Jan said: “The doctrine of Christianity never really sat comfortably with me. It was like a coat that didn’t fit. I wore it but it never felt right and by the time I was about 20, I was happier taking the coat off. Sadly, I didn’t wear a coat at all for the next 25 years.”

~ Reasons for dissatisfaction with natal religion varied. They included:

- Issues to do with the faith, theology and practice of the dominant religion (Christianity)
- Discomfort with being asked to “just have faith”
- Problems with church and fellow members of previous religious groups

Rambo’s five styles of quest process:

1. active questing
2. receptive
3. rejecting
4. apathetic
5. passive

~ Response styles amongst Australian converts:

- Active questing featured prominently (14 testimonies)
- Receptive next most common (6 testimonies)

Encounter for Australian converts

- ~ Encountering advocates vital for the process of conversion for Australians

Methods of encountering advocates for Islam	Men	Women
Subject sought out Muslims to learn about Islam	4	1
Subject encountered Islam via converted spouse	1	1
Subject encountered Islam via Muslim friend	1	5
Subject encountered Islam via relationship with Muslim	1	6
Total	7	13

Interaction for Australian converts

~ This research finds that most converts do not take a single path to conversion.

~ In the vast majority of conversion testimonies (seventeen), the intellectual motif figured prominently.

✦ Gregor's non-Muslim mother advised him that Islam was, in her mind, one of the great world religions and that he ought to study the faith properly before accepting it.

~ Affectional relationships were discussed in over half the testimonies (twelve).

~ The experimental motif played a role in seven testimonies.

✦ Zakiyyah said: I decided to join the *salat* something I had never done before. I did not understand anything other than “*Allahu Akbar*” and the final *salaams* (I just followed the motions), but *subhanallah*, that one experience of *salat* had a profound affect.

Six motifs as paths to conversion

1. intellectual personal study of religion thru various forms of media w/o significant social pressure from advocates
2. mystical sudden ‘Paul on the road to Damascus’ type experience
3. experimental potential convert tries on various aspects before making commitment
4. affectional relationships btwn potential convert and advocate are nurtured facilitating conversion
5. revivalist pressure in a managed setting
6. coercive rare event of heavy social pressure through such methods as ‘brain-washing’

Commitment for Australian converts

- ~ Commitment sometimes difficult for many of the converts, who spoke specifically about resistance to Islam.

- ~ Theology and beliefs important in acceptance of Islam:

- Beliefs about relationship with God, human nature and sin (mentioned in 11 accounts)
- Islam as simple, logical, rational religion (6 accounts)
- Oneness of God (5 accounts)
- Beliefs about the unseen, Day of Judgement, and the hereafter (5 accounts)

- ~ Lifestyle

- Code for living (8 accounts)
- Modesty and dress code (4 accounts)
- Example of other Muslims (4 accounts)
- Teachings about racial and sexual equality; promoting peace and brotherhood (4 accounts)
- Respect for parents (1 account)
- Importance of seeking knowledge (1 account)

“I began to read everything I could get my hands on (including stories of women who had converted). Gradually my attitude began to change from one of resistance to one of acceptance.” ~Robin

Commitment for Australian converts (cont.)

~ Prophethood

- Progressive revelation (5 accounts)
- Stature and nature of Jesus (peace be upon him) as Prophet (4 accounts)
- Muhammad (peace be upon him) as the last Prophet (1 account)

~ Qur'an

- Beauty of Qur'an, call to prayer and ritual prayer (6 accounts)
- Miraculous nature of the Qur'an (2 accounts)

~ Surrender is one of the features of Rambo's stage of commitment. A number of testimonies described moments of surrender and corresponding relief.

Consequences for Australian converts

- ~ The effects of conversion are not always immediate and radical, but can include cumulative effects over time.
- ~ Generally the testimonies framed their post-conversion experiences positively except for some opposition from friends and family who disapproved of their conversions.
- ~ Difficulties with the larger Muslim community were also discussed by some converts.
- ~ A number of the testimonies described changes in perception and behaviour that have brought them closer to what they perceive as the will of God:
 - Rifaat described some personal “*jihads*” in developing his character and finding a mission in providing legal services to Muslims.
 - Aref felt that Islam allowed him to open his mind to truth and found a purpose in his life.
 - Aminah, Julie, Eman and Zakiyyah described their decision to wear head coverings as part of their Islamic dress code.