

# Understanding African Expatriates' Conversions to Islam in Bahrain

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## ABSTRACT

**This exploratory study looks at the various motivations to explain why Sub-Saharan African expatriate workers are converting to Islam in Bahrain. A quantitative approach was utilized where 294 Africans who recently accepted in this predominantly Muslim country completed a detailed survey. Oneness of God [Tawheed] was the overwhelmingly largest reason for these individuals to switch faith from Christianity to Islam. Additionally, the Islamic concepts of *Fitrah* [innate disposition] and *Hedayah* [Divine Guidance] further explain the journeys that these Africans undertook in their search for meaning. The conclusions drawn from the findings of this study emphasize the importance of employing these fundamental Islamic concepts in reaching out not only to the African community in Bahrain but also for inviting [Da'wah] other Christian communities in the Gulf and other parts of the world.**

**Keywords:** Religious Conversion, African Expatriates, *Tawheed*, *Fitrah*, *Hedaya*, *Da'wah*.

## INTRODUCTION

Converting from one religion to another is an immensely huge decision in an individual's life. It is often a result of a complex interplay of spiritual, psychological, social, and sometimes, economic factors, and for some, it is a decision that takes months and years of reflection, whereas for others it is remarkably over in minutes. For most converts, changing faith opens a gateway to a new life, many a times with new beliefs, practices, and even new relationships.

Within the Gulf countries, Islam is not only the spiritual cornerstone of the majority of the locals, but also the social and cultural framework that permeates life in this region of the Middle East. Exploring conversion to Islam in Bahrain, a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC], offers a unique insight into migration, labour, and cultural and religious integration. Among Bahrain's demographically diverse expatriate populations, Sub-Saharan African migrant workers present particularly intriguing cases of cultural adaptation and religious transformation.

The expatriate community in Bahrain accounts for more than half the population and plays an indispensable role in the country's economic development and growth of infrastructure. Expats from various Sub-Saharan African nations like Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda and more, make up almost 5% of the total population. Post-COVID-19, Bahrain has witnessed a steady rise in workers from these countries. Most of the migrant workers are male and are particularly being hired as security guards and within the retail sector. There is a smaller portion of women from Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly from Ethiopia and neighbouring East African nations, who are entering the country's labour force primarily as domestic workers [Open Data Bahrain, 2024].

Despite their visible and growing presence, very little academic attention has been given to lives and experiences of these expats in the Gulf. There is some academic research on African migrant workers to the Middle East, particularly those in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, but it is mainly focussed on their poor working conditions and human trafficking. This research aims to help fill some of this gap by exploring the motivations behind the religious conversions to Islam of Africans, shedding light on the broader socio-cultural and economic dynamics at play.

Similar to other countries in the Gulf region, Islam is very visible in the daily life in Bahrain. For most non-Muslim expatriates, this results in a far greater exposure to Muslims and Islamic practices and values. Experiencing the daily rhythms of Islamic life, coupled with interactions with Bahraini Muslims and fellow expatriates who are already part of the Islamic faith, often creates a very favourable environment for exploration and self-reflection.

Like most people who change their faith, the motivations for African expatriates in Bahrain who convert to Islam are deeply personal and reasonably varied. The specific reasons for becoming Muslim and the journeys that individuals take may be as different as the people who undertake them but there are some common themes. Some are forced to examine their lives and seek the purpose of their existence after undergoing some major challenge or experiencing trauma. Others are constantly looking for meaning and the moment they find their path do not hesitate to take that leap of faith. However, not all who change their religion are answering to some Divine calling; Some switch their faith for material purposes like marriage or better financial opportunities and favours. Irrespective of the motivations or the journey undertaken, the act of religious conversion can greatly change an individual resulting in a wholly distinct worldview and a completely different identity.

Over the past few years, more and more African expatriates in Bahrain are becoming Muslim. In the last eleven years, Africans have gone from being less than 3% of all converts to Islam in 2013, to accounting for more than two fifths of all those who became Muslim in Bahrain in 2023. To date, the upward trend has not abated in 2024 [Harunani, 2024]. What has changed? Why has this group of people become such a significant part of the conversion scene in Bahrain?

This study seeks to address this overarching and timely question: Why do African expatriates convert to Islam in Bahrain? The motivations for conversion are then compared to their demographic variables, like age, gender, marital status and more to see if there are any correlations. Looking beyond the demographic description of African Muslim converts; the research also explores the new Muslims' childhood; their beliefs and practices before they migrated to Bahrain; and their journey to Islam after they came to live on this island kingdom.

Investigating the lives of African new Muslims and their journeys to Islam can offer greater insight as to why African expats are attracted to Islam.

In summary, the study explores the following questions with respect to the Africans converting to Islam in Bahrain. Who are they? Why are they accepting Islam? Is there a correlation between who they are and why they accept? Are there any other factors that may explain their inclination to accept Islam?

A quantitative approach was used in this study. 294 African expatriates who converted to Islam within the past five years in Bahrain completed a detailed survey about their journey to Islam. It is believed that the analysis of this sample population will offer a broad perspective on trends and correlations and provide an overview of reasons why Africans are drawn to Islam.

This introduction provides an outline for the basis, objectives, and key research questions this study hopes to address. The literature review in the subsequent section summarizes existing religious conversion theories in general and studies on Islamic conversion in particular, identifying some of the gaps this research aims to address. The quantitative design of the study is briefly described in the methodology section. Additionally, the ethical considerations and limitations of this research are presented. The findings from this study are then presented. Finally, the discussion explores and, to some extent, explains these findings within Islamic concepts like *Tawheed* [Oneness of Allah], *Fitrah* [Innate Disposition], and *Hedaya* [Divine Guidance]. The paper ends with recommendations for *Da'wah* and areas that need further research.

By offering a broad exploration of a population that remains underrepresented in academic discourse, this research contributes to literature on religious conversion. By focusing on the experiences of African expatriates in Bahrain, it not only illuminates the unique motivations and challenges they face but also creates a better understanding of conversion to Islam in the Gulf countries.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theories of Religious Conversion**

Religious conversion has been studied across disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and theology. Several theoretical models have been developed to explain the processes and motivations underlying conversion. Among the most influential frameworks is Lewis Rambo's seven-stage model, which identifies key phases in the conversion journey: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences [Rambo, 1993]. This model emphasizes the dynamic interplay between individual agency and external influences, emphasizing the gradual and relational nature of religious transformation.

Earlier approaches, such as Lofland and Stark's "funnel" model, looked at the social and structural conditions that facilitate conversion, particularly the role of interpersonal networks and group dynamics [Lofland and Stark, 2018]. These sociological perspectives stress that conversion often occurs within a community or relational context, emphasizing the importance of people in an individual's life who greatly influence the decision to convert.

Conversely, psychological theories tend to look at the intrapersonal aspects of conversion. William James's seminal work at the turn of the last century viewing conversion as the resolution of inner conflict or a "divided self" remains a cornerstone in this field [James, 1999]. From an Islamic perspective, theological concepts such as *Fitrah* [the innate predisposition to recognize and worship One God] and *Hedayah* [Divine Guidance] provide alternative explanations for conversion that somewhat reflect James' Christianity-based theories. These frameworks suggest that conversion is less about a sociological phenomenon and more about returning to one's inherent spiritual nature as guided by divine intervention.

Recent scholarship has sought to integrate these perspectives, presenting conversion as a hybrid process shaped by spiritual quests, identity reconstruction, and socio-cultural factors. Greil [1977] and Bromley and Shupe's [1979] work, for instance, combines identity theories with social network analysis, highlighting how converts navigate the intersection of personal belief and communal acceptance. These integrative models are particularly useful in understanding the complex motivations behind religious conversion in multicultural and diasporic settings such as the Gulf region. Some of the more influential religious conversion models and theories are summarized in the table below [Table 1].

**Table 1: Summary of Popular Religious Conversion Theories and Models.**

Model/Theory	Key Features	Pros	Cons
Lofland and Stark's Model [1965]	Seven stages of conversion focusing on social and relational aspects, such as social networks and personal bonds.	Highlights the importance of social connections in conversion.	Overlooks psychological aspects of conversion.
Lewis R. Rambo's Seven-Stage Model [1993]	Conversion as a dynamic process with seven stages: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences.	Incorporates various social, psychological, and cultural factors.	Can be too linear, doesn't account for individual complexities.
Lofland and Skonovd's Conversion Motifs [1981]	Typology based on six motifs: Intellectual, Mystical, Experimental, Affectional, Revivalist, and Coercive conversions.	Flexible and applicable across different religious experiences.	May lack specificity in complex conversion journeys.
Rambo and Farhadian's Interdisciplinary Model [2014]	Interdisciplinary approach combining insights from multiple fields; builds on Rambo's seven-stage model but emphasizes non-linearity.	Holistic and comprehensive, considering multiple factors in conversion.	Potential complexity and difficulty in application.
Stark and Bainbridge's Rational Choice Theory [1987]	Conversion as a rational decision-making process where individuals weigh costs and benefits.	Focuses on the strategic and social aspects of conversion.	Oversimplifies the personal and emotional depth of conversion.
Greil's Socialization and Networks Approach [1977]	Combines socialization and social networks, focusing on individuals with "spoiled	Effectively combines social and	Focuses heavily on the seeking phase, not

	identities" seeking religious answers.	psychological factors.	the full conversion process.
Henri Gooren's Conversion Career Approach [2010]	Stages of conversion career: pre-affiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession, and disaffiliation, incorporating individual and organizational factors.	Provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing conversion across contexts.	Broad scope may dilute the focus on specific conversion experiences.
William James's Psychological Model [1999]	Focuses on conversion as a personal, emotional experience, often involving sudden, dramatic transformation.	Influential in understanding psychological aspects of conversion.	Overly individualistic, neglects social and cultural dimensions.
Roger Straus's Active Conversion Model [1979]	Emphasizes the active role of individuals seeking religious change, through social networks and personal experimentation.	Highlights the agency of converts in their search for religious fulfillment.	Does not account for coercive or emotional conversion experiences.
James T. Richardson's Conversion as a Social Process [1978]	Focuses on group dynamics, social support, and collective identity in religious conversion.	Emphasizes social environments and community interactions in conversion.	May overlook cognitive and emotional aspects of conversion.
Richard Travisano's Social Psychological Model [1970]	Differentiates between alternation [minor changes] and conversion [complete identity disruption]; highlights personal choice in identity changes.	Highlights the active role of individuals in shaping their identities.	May generalize the traumatic nature of conversion too broadly.
Snow and Machalek's Biographical Reconstruction [1983]	Conversion involves reinterpreting one's past in light of new religious identity, including adopting new roles and language.	Emphasizes the transformative power of conversion on personal narratives.	May not fully capture external social pressures influencing conversion.
Bromley and Shupe's Role Theory of Conversion and Commitment [1981]	Conversion explained as dissatisfaction with current roles, leading to adopting new religious identities and roles.	Highlights role alignment and social support in sustaining commitment.	Overemphasizes social aspects, less applicable to conversions in established religions.
Gartrell and Shannon's Rational Choice Model of Conversion [1985]	Focuses on rational choice, where individuals weigh emotional and social benefits of joining a new religious movement [NRM].	Emphasizes timing and cognitive utility in conversion decisions.	Oversimplifies conversion by focusing mainly on rational and utilitarian aspects.
Long and Hadden's Socialization Model of Conversion [1983]	Conversion as a process of socialization, focusing on recruitment, monitoring, and role assignment within religious organizations.	Provides insight into the role of group socialization in fostering commitment.	Underestimates individual psychological and emotional factors in conversion.

### **Studies on Conversion to Islam – Secular Perspectives**

Islamic conversion has been the subject of some academic attention, with studies exploring diverse contexts and populations. Most of these researchers approach Islamic conversion from a secular perspective where motivations to convert are explained from a psychological, sociological, economic, or some other non-spiritual perspective. Given below are some key studies following this approach.

Focusing on “Balik-Islam,” [literally “return to Islam” – refers to individuals who believe they have “reverted” back to their “natural religion” – Deen al Fitrah] Marybeth Acac [2020] examines the social and psychological reasons behind the conversion of Filipinos, particularly migrant workers in the Gulf who are now back in the Philippines. Her concept of “symbolic negotiation” offers a fresh perspective, though the study omits discounts the spiritual aspect of becoming Muslim and does not look at post-conversion experiences.

Exploring conversion in Europe, Caroline Neumeuller [2012] delves into the narratives of 76 native British and German Muslims, highlighting commonalities in their motivations, changes in lifestyle, and interaction with family and friends. She provides an excellent historical background to Islamic conversion in Europe and her studies of contemporary Muslim converts deals with challenging subjects like dating, pre-marital relations, and homosexuality.

Conversion to Islam, as analyzed by Monika Wohlrab-Sahr [1999], is framed through symbolism. Studying the conversion narratives of American and German new Muslims, she hypothesized that the decision to convert maybe be explained through syncretism [an amalgamation of religions], battle [internal conflict], and transformation [acceptance of a new symbolic reality]. Wohlrab-Sahr bypassed the typical stage models and focussed on the social dynamics that shaped Christian-to-Muslim conversions.

Challenges faced by American Muslim converts in the post-9/11 era are the focus of Muhammad Kolila’s [2019] work. Using Rambo’s seven-stage model to explain conversion, he emphasizes the lack of community support for new Muslims. Although Kolila adds historical conversion stories and examples from the life of the Prophet Muhammad [peace be upon him], his explanations for conversion are overly generalized and lack depth.

Patterns and theories in mid-20th-century British Sufi conversions are addressed in Ali Kose’s [1996] research on 70 converts. Although informative, having zeroed in on conversion in the 60s, 70s and 80s, the study is quite dated.

Analyzing familial tensions, Ramahi and Suleiman [2017] portray the “intimate stranger” dynamic many British converts experience, straddling the divide between their pre- and post-conversion worlds – essentially “being” in both worlds while not being really accepted in either. Juliette Galonnier’s [2018] research compares the experiences of race-privileged White new Muslims to Black new Muslims in the US and France.

Through interviews with 20 Finnish converts to Islam, Lota Marmilinta [2017] sheds light on the very early post-conversion period, using theoretical models from Rambo and Roald. However, her small, localized sample limits the broader applicability of her findings.

A general but foundational overview of Islamic conversion is provided by Kim Knott [2017], focusing on Western perceptions. This is a useful guide but does not look at the psychological and social issues that new Muslims have to deal with. Conversely, Majid et al., [2015] focussed on providing social support to new Muslims in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia through strong, structured, Mosque-based activities.

British male and female converts' motivations and identity challenges are thoroughly explored in Yassir Suleiman's [2013] books, though the findings remain specific to Britain. Twenty-one Australian female converts' experiences with hijab and adapting to "Muslim" culture are examined in Tuba Boz's 2012 study.

Lastly, Naomi Kok's [2016] comparison of Christian and Muslim conversion narratives in the Netherlands and Yussuf Katsura's [2018] focus on Japanese converts offer unique cultural insights, though they bear little relevance to the current paper.

### **Studies on Conversion to Islam – Islamic Perspectives**

Maha Al-Qwidi's [2002] dissertation modifies Rambo's model by incorporating key Islamic principles like *Hedaya* [Divine Guidance], *Fitrah* [Innate Disposition], and *Tawheed* [Oneness of Allah] and aligns well with the conclusions drawn from this study. Her research offers a strong theoretical framework; however, having drawn on the experiences of only 37 British converts, the study is limited in its generalizability.

Kassim, Abdullah, and Baba [2013] provide insights into the challenges faced by Muslim converts in Malaysia from a classical Islamic perspective. They emphasize self-discipline and deal with concepts like *Tawheed* and *Ruhani* [soul-related] spirituality. However, they focus on individual challenges and do not extend to community or social issues faced by converts. The same authors provide a comprehensive guide for converts from a practical, legal, and spiritual perspective their study, *A Study of Islamic Conversion in Malaysia* [2013]

Majid et al., [2016] investigate the spiritual and psychological reasons as to why individuals convert to Islam in Selangor, Malaysia. Though geographically limited, their study is relevant to the current paper and provides valuable insight into the conversion process.

Shaharuddin et al., [2019] identify a strong link between *Zakat* and the understanding and practice of Islam among new Muslims [*Muallaf*] in Selangor, Malaysia. The study highlights the importance of economic support for new Muslims, a topic not explored in this current study but of great relevance to African converts to Islam.

Similarly, studies from the Gulf region reveal unique dynamics shaped by migration and unusually disproportionate foreign labour. Research on Filipino migrant workers in Bahrain [Harunani and Ushama 2024] demonstrates how interactions with Muslims and exposure to Islamic practices facilitate conversion. In this study, the concept of *Tawheed* [Oneness of God] resonates strongly with individuals seeking spiritual fulfilment, while socio-economic incentives such as better job security and communal belonging play a marginal role in the lives of most converts.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, conversion to Islam often takes place in societies where religious identity plays a significant role in social, cultural, and economic interactions. Conversion in these settings is frequently through da'wah [invitation to Islam] driven by personal encounters with Muslims, and alignment with Islamic concepts like *Tawheed*, and values like justice and equality. While these handful of studies focus on African contexts, they nonetheless, provide some insights into why African expatriates may be inclined to Islam in the Gulf.

### Research Gap

While extensive theoretical and reasonable field work has been conducted on Islamic religious conversion in the West and in Southeast Asia, there has been very limited research on Africans converting to Islam. In the Gulf region, where immigrant labour is a large part of the social landscape, research has concentrated on the challenges faced by migrant workers, particularly on topics like human trafficking, exploitation, and inequality. While these studies provide important insights into the hardships faced by expatriates, they do not address the cultural and religious transformations that many experience. The interaction between labour migration, cultural adaptation, and religious conversion remains a neglected area, and is completely absent in the case of African expatriates becoming Muslim in Bahrain. By focusing on the conversion journeys of African expatriates in Bahrain, this study seeks to fill this critical gap. It aims to offer a better understanding of the African new Muslim in this island kingdom and what motivated them to convert to Islam.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses an exploratory research design to understand the experiences of Africans converting to Islam in Bahrain. The lack of academic studies on this specific topic and the opportunity to survey a large sample population across a very wide range of questions makes this research an ideal exploratory study. Exploratory research aims to gain insights and understanding rather than test specific hypotheses or models.

Bahrain is a small country with a population of only 1.58 million people, more than half of whom are expatriates from all parts of the world [Open Data Bahrain, 2024]. As a result, the Kingdom offers a unique socio-cultural environment that could be thought of as a microcosm of the world. Add to this "social laboratory" an increasing number of African expats who are embracing Islam, and one has the ideal atmosphere to explore this topic. By employing a quantitative survey, the study seeks to identify patterns and themes that provide a greater understanding of religious conversion. This research style not only addresses the gap in academic knowledge but also hopes to offer practical insights for da'wah organizations to improve their outreach.

### Survey Design and Data Collection

Over 400 African New Muslim expats who were fluent in English were asked to complete the New Muslim survey. The survey consisted of 103 questions. Most of the questions were Likert scale, multiple-choice, Yes/No, and demographic. There were a few open-ended questions. The survey was divided into thematic sections:

- About You: demographic details like age, gender, marital status, nationality, education, and employment details.

- Life before Islam: Childhood and religious upbringing, views on Islam, and significant life events preceding conversion.
- Interest in Islam and Conversion: What motivated them to Islam, pivotal moments, and the actual conversion to Islam.
- Life after Converting to Islam: Challenges faced in learning and practicing Islam, community engagement, and overall satisfaction.

Although the survey was very extensive, only the relevant portions of the findings [sections 1, 2 and part of 3 above] are presented and discussed. The survey was designed using Google Forms and distributed using digital platforms like WhatsApp, email, and social media to maximize reach. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, leveraging the staff and volunteers of the largest Da'wah and New Muslim Care organization in Bahrain. To ensure data integrity, responses were anonymized, and incomplete surveys were excluded from the analysis.

For a total African new Muslim population in Bahrain estimated at under fifteen hundred, the Krejcie and Morgan [1970] table suggests that a sample size of 306 is sufficient. From August 2023 to March 2024 a total of 353 Africans completed the online survey. After removing duplicates and incomplete entries, the final dataset consisted of 294 valid survey responses, providing a slightly smaller than expected for quantitative analysis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical integrity was central to this study, given the sensitive and deeply personal nature of religious conversion. Several measures were taken to ensure participant well-being and the ethical rigor of the research:

- Informed Consent: The prelude to the survey briefed all respondents about the study's purpose, methodology, and potential use of the findings. By proceeding with the survey, the participants acknowledged their consent.
- Confidentiality: Personal information collected will not be disclosed or published. Only generalized findings will be presented.
- Right to Withdraw: Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any repercussions.

### **Limitations of the Study**

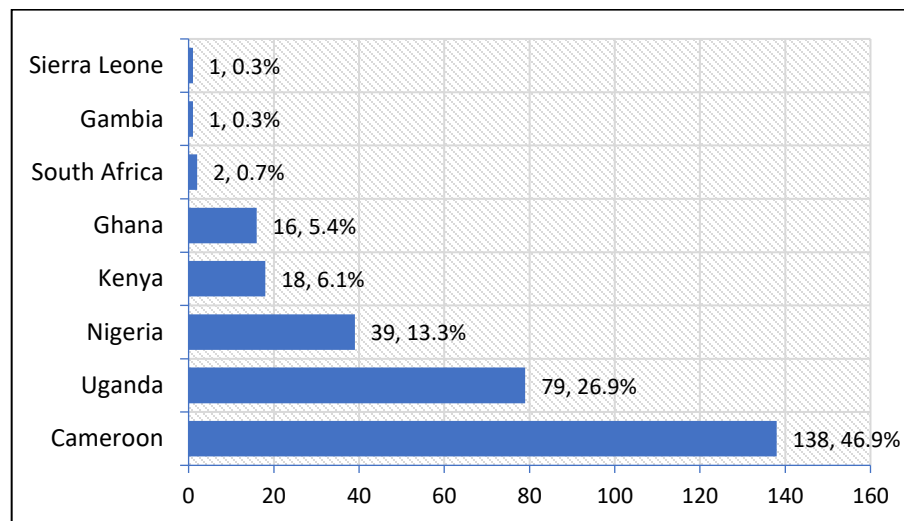
This study's exploratory nature limits the depth of analysis – it lacks hypothesis testing or a guiding theoretical framework and relies solely on the collected data. The reliance on self-reported survey data introduces potential biases, such as recall bias, social desirability bias, and acquiescence bias. This is particularly important since respondents are recent converts still learning about their new faith and would be inclined to "appease." Additionally, while the sample size of 294 is close to the 306 recommended by the Krejcie and Morgan table for a population of 1,500, this slight shortfall should be noted when interpreting the study's findings.

## **FINDINGS**

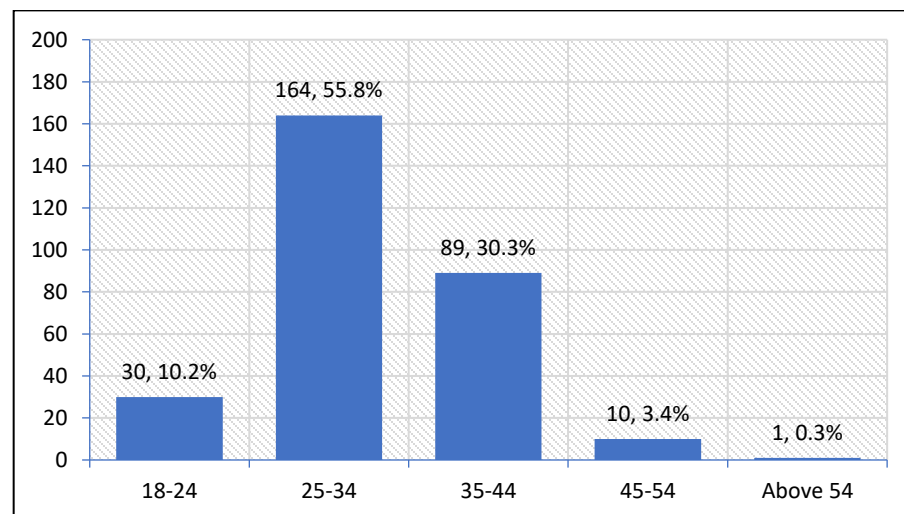
### **Demographic Profile of the African Convert to Islam**

Of the 294 Africans that filled the survey, almost half [46.9%] were from Cameroon, Ugandans made up over a quarter [26.9%] of those surveyed, followed by Nigerians [13.3%], Kenyans

[6.1%], and Ghanaians [5.4%]. Two individuals from South Africa and one each from Sierra Leone and Gambia made up the balance of the respondents. The data is somewhat reflective of the nationalities that are converting to Islam in Bahrain [Harunani, 2024] but is also a product of the snowball sampling technique.



**Figure 1: New Muslim Survey Respondents by National Origin [n = 294]**



**Figure 2: New Muslim Survey Respondents by Age [n = 294]**

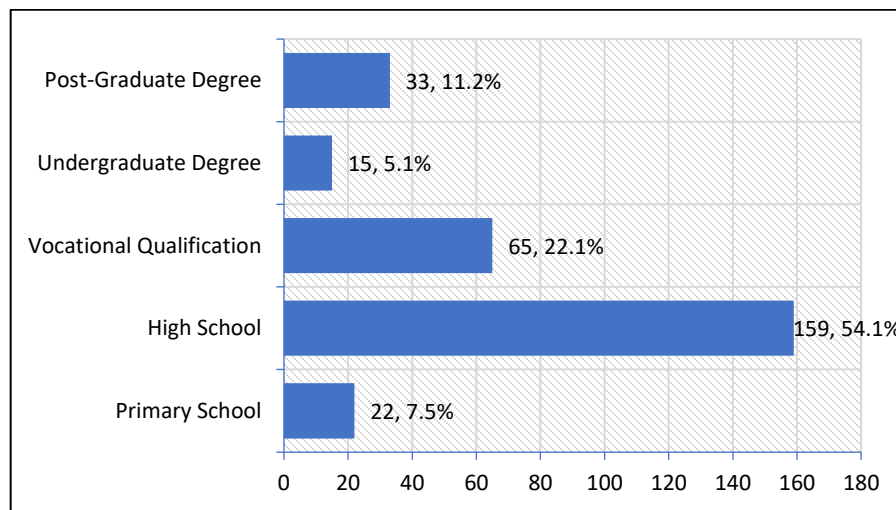
As seen in Figure 2 above, the majority of respondents were middle aged between the ages of 25 and 44 [81.1%]. Young adults made up just over 10%, whereas only 11 respondents [3.7%] accounted for those above 45.

One major imbalance in this study is gender. The overwhelming majority of converts to Islam who filled out the Survey were male [271 or 92.2%], leaving only 23 female respondents. This gross gender imbalance reflects to a great extent the larger African expatriate community in Bahrain and the consequent African new Muslims in Bahrain. As of December 2022, males made up almost 79% of the Sub-Saharan African population in Bahrain [Gulf Labour Markets and Migration Programme, 2022]. Over the past four years more males from these countries are

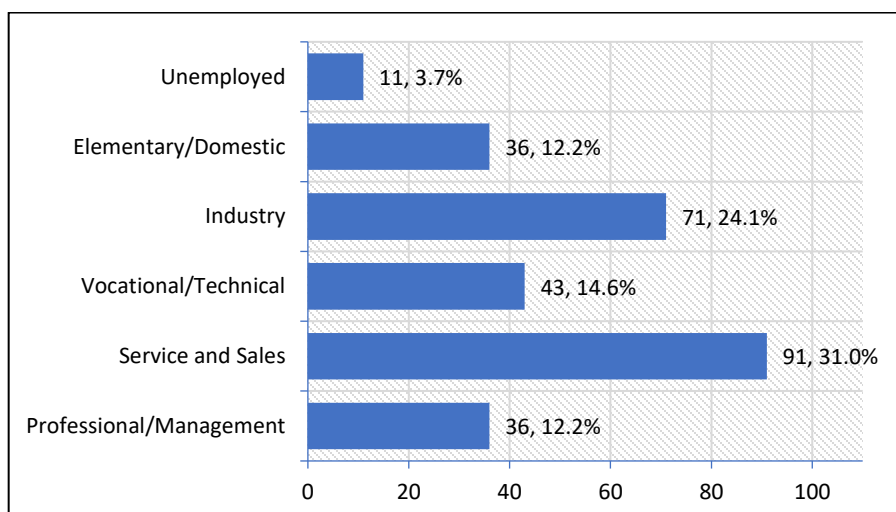
accepting Islam relative to the females. The primary reason for this is access to African women expatriates – most females are hired as domestic help thereby limiting their opportunities to meet Da'ees and Islamic outreach efforts in the kingdom [Harunani, 2024].

Just over half the survey respondents [52.4%] indicated that they had never been married. 133 or 45.2% reported that they were betrothed and the remaining 2.4% were either divorced or widowed. Interestingly, almost two-thirds [65.5%] of the Africans surveyed said they had children suggesting that a good number had offspring outside of wedlock.

As seen in Figure 3 below, twenty-two respondents [7.5%] had only completed primary education. More than half [54.1%] had completed high school, whereas just over a fifth [22.1%] had acquired a certificate or diploma in a vocational program. A small number [15 or 5.1%] had completed their undergraduate degree and a surprising larger number, thirty-three [11.2%] had completed a post-graduate degree.



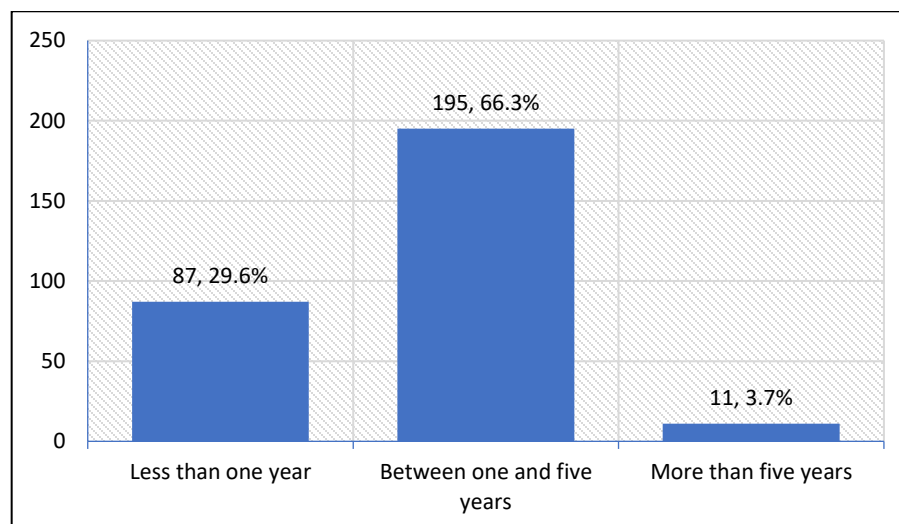
**Figure 3: New Muslim Survey Respondents by Education [n = 294]**



**Figure 4: New Muslim Survey Respondents by Profession [n = 294]**

The majority of African that filled out the Survey reported working in service and sales [31%], the typical job in this category would be as security guards or salespeople. The next most common profession was working in factories [24.1%], followed by vocational or technical jobs [14.6%] as an electrician or plumber etc. Thirty-six expats worked in upper management or as professionals and a similar number [12.2%] were hired as domestic help, typically as janitors and nannies. Eleven [3.7%] of the respondents were unemployed as of the time of the Survey. The professional distribution does not match up well with the education of these expatriates. This could be either due to the very competitive job market in Bahrain or it may also be a degree of social desirability bias given that the survey was self-administered.

When asked about how much they were earning, the majority of respondents [79.3%] reported a monthly salary less than BD 200 [USD 530]. Twenty-seven respondents indicated that they earned between BD 200 and BD 500 [USD 1,329], and only 3 of the new Muslims surveyed made more than BD 500 per month. The low monthly income suggests that the employment market in Bahrain is very competitive, and well-educated Africans may be opting for lower paying jobs.

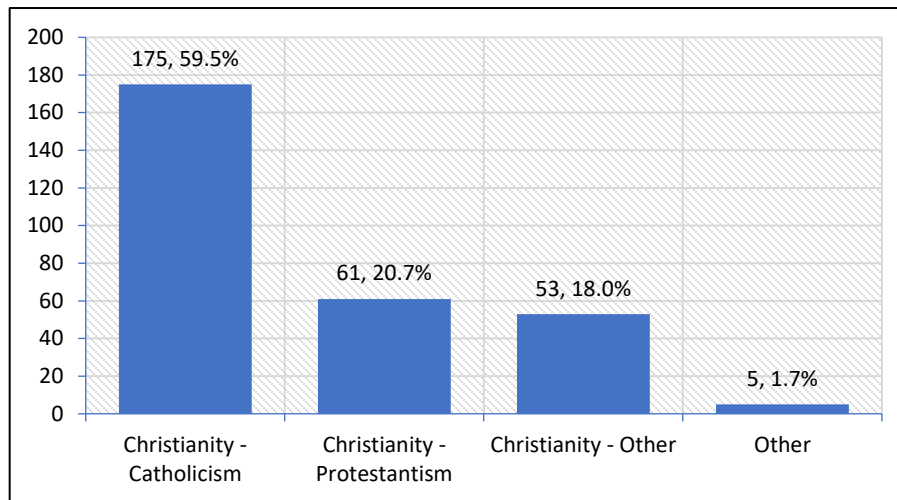


**Figure 5: New Muslim Survey Respondents by Length of Stay in Bahrain [n = 294]**

Less than thirty percent of the respondents had been in Bahrain for less than a year [see Figure 5], about two-thirds had been living in Bahrain between one and five years, and only eleven [3.7%] reported to have lived on this island nation for more than five years.

The overwhelming majority [98.3%] of all the Africans surveyed professed to be Christian prior to coming to Islam. Almost sixty percent were Catholic, over twenty percent were Protestant, and 18% did not report any specific Christian denomination.

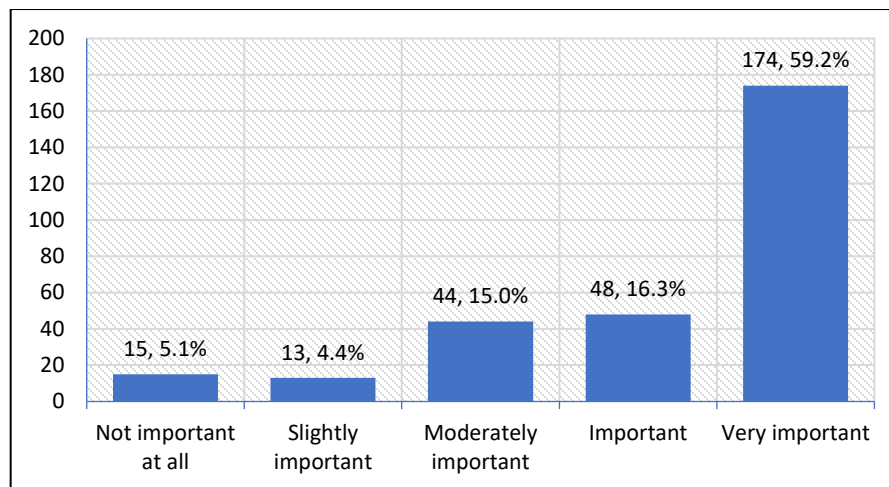
In summary, the 294 Africans surveyed came from eight different Sub-Saharan countries, the majority from Cameroon. Most of them were male and about half were married, with an even greater percent [65.5%] having children. All were reasonably educated and worked in a diverse range of jobs probably earning less than their education would normally entitle them to. The overwhelming majority had lived in this part of the world for less than five years and had come from a Christian background.



**Figure 6: Survey Respondents' Religion prior to Converting to Islam [n = 294]**

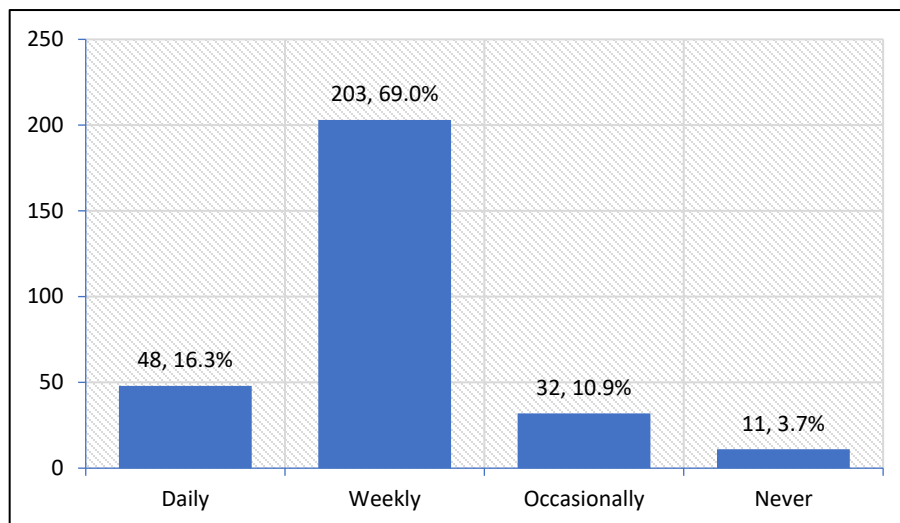
### Life Experiences and Choices that May Impact Conversion

All 294 survey respondents were asked several questions about their childhood, family, growing up in Africa, and eventually coming to Bahrain and accepting Islam. Of particular relevance to this study is understanding the religious environment that these Africans grew up in, whether they ever questioned their beliefs, and how aligned were their beliefs to Islam prior to actually converting. The following section highlights some of these key findings that may shed further light on why Africans convert to Islam.

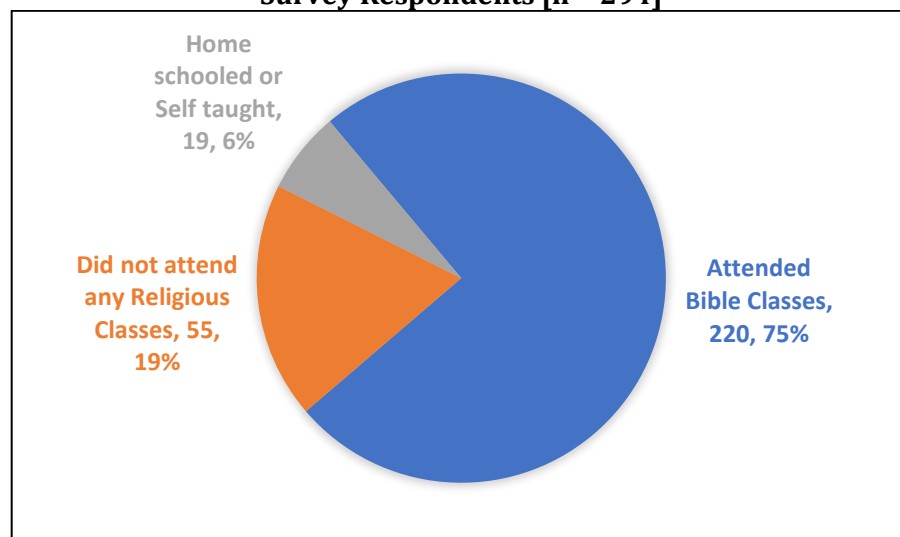


**Figure 7: Importance of Religion in the Survey Respondents' Family while growing up in their Home Country in Africa [n = 294]**

Over ninety percent of all the African new Muslims surveyed reported that religion was moderately to very important while growing up, with almost 60% stating that religion was very important in their household [see Figure 7 above]. This corresponds well with how often respondents frequented church, with over 85% attending either daily or weekly [see Figure 8 below]. Forty-eight [16.3%] of those surveyed reported daily church attendance and a whopping 203 [69%] were weekly congregants.

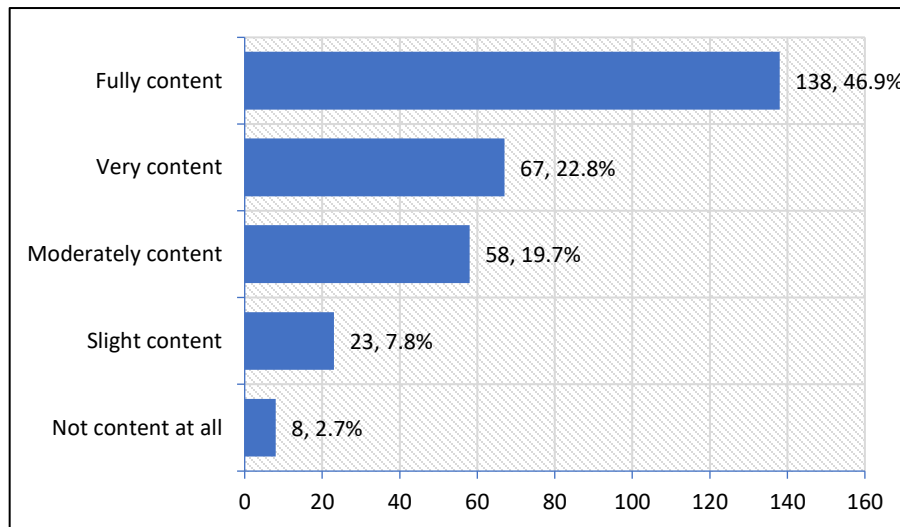


**Figure 8: Frequency of Church Attendance while growing up in Africa [under 18] Amongst Survey Respondents [n = 294]**



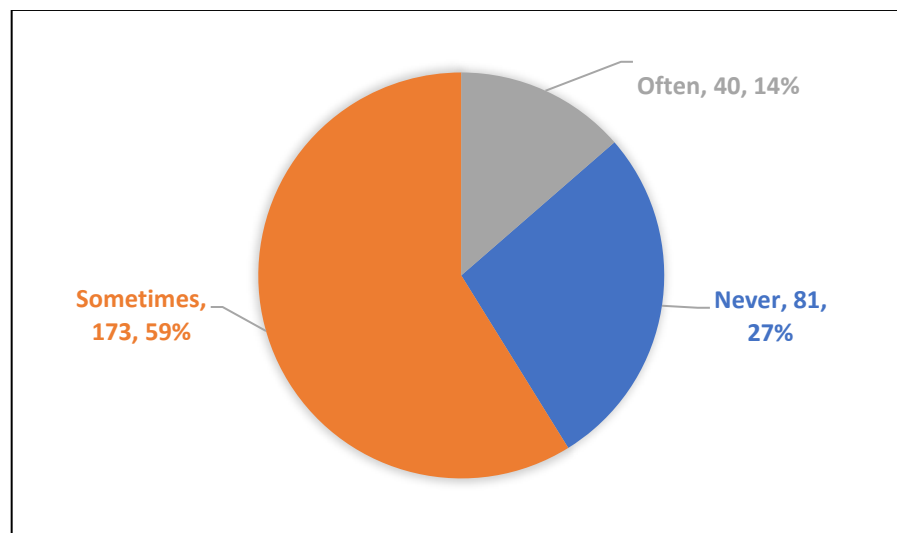
**Figure 8: Christian Religious Education Attendance Among Survey Respondents during their Childhood in Africa [n = 294]**

Similarly, three-quarters of all the respondents used to attend Bible classes during their childhood in their home countries. And a further, nineteen of the 294 surveyed were taught Christianity at home. Just below a fifth of the Africans in the study [19%] stated that they did not attend any religious classes while growing up.



**Figure 9: Level of Satisfaction with Religious/Moral Upbringing Among Survey Respondents during their Childhood in Africa [n = 294]**

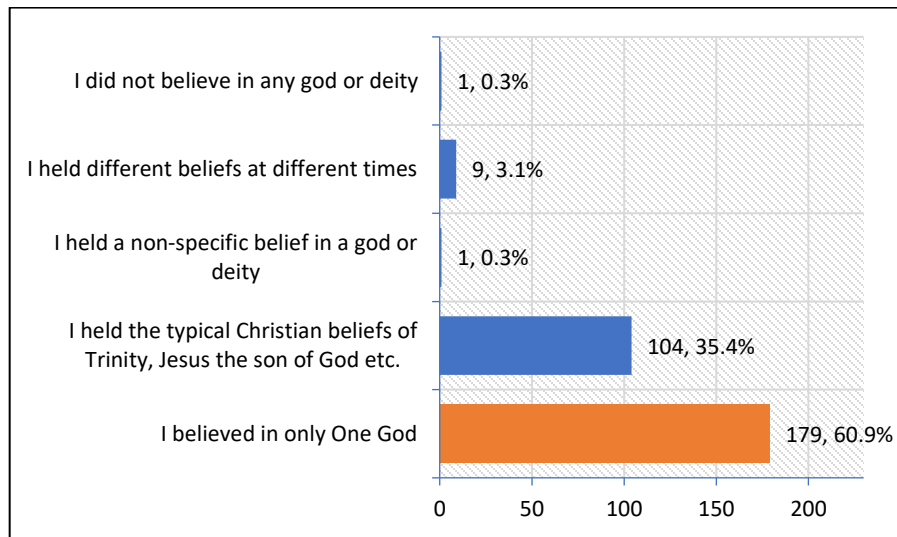
Almost 90% of the 294 survey respondents were moderately to fully content with their religious or moral upbringing. Only 8 or 2.7% stated that they were “not content at all” with how they were raised with regards to religion and morality. However, when asked if they ever questioned their beliefs while growing up, 173 [59%] of the African survey respondents stated that they questioned “sometimes” and forty [14%] said they questioned their beliefs “often” [see Figure 10 below]. Despite such scepticism, 81% of the respondents never considered switching to another faith until they learned about Islam and decided to become Muslim. Only fifty-six or 19% of the Africans admitted that they did consider changing their religion.



**Figure 10: Frequency of Questioning Religious Beliefs/Practices During Upbringing in Africa Among Respondents [n = 294]**

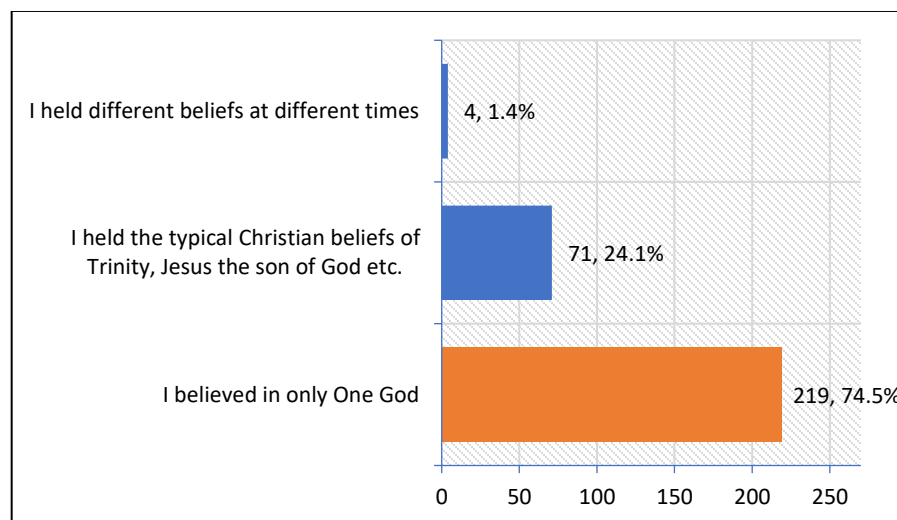
Over three-fifths the survey respondents [60.9%] stated that, despite their professed faith of Christianity, they always only “believed in only One God.” 104 [35.4%] of the Africans surveyed accepted the typical Christian beliefs of Trinity and believed that Jesus [peace be upon him] was the son of God and died for their sins. Nine of the respondents held different beliefs at different

times, one respondent had faith in some non-specific deity, whereas one of the Africans admitted to being an atheist.



**Figure 11: Fundamental Beliefs About God During Childhood and Adolescence [under 18 years of age] Among Survey Respondents [n = 294]**

Interestingly, as they grew older, most of the African converts reported having beliefs more aligned with Islam. Almost three-quarters [74.5%] reported that they believed in only One God – this is almost 15% higher than the number that claimed monotheistic beliefs in their teens. Similarly, when compared to their adolescence and teen years, twenty-three respondents no longer believed in the typical Christian dogma.

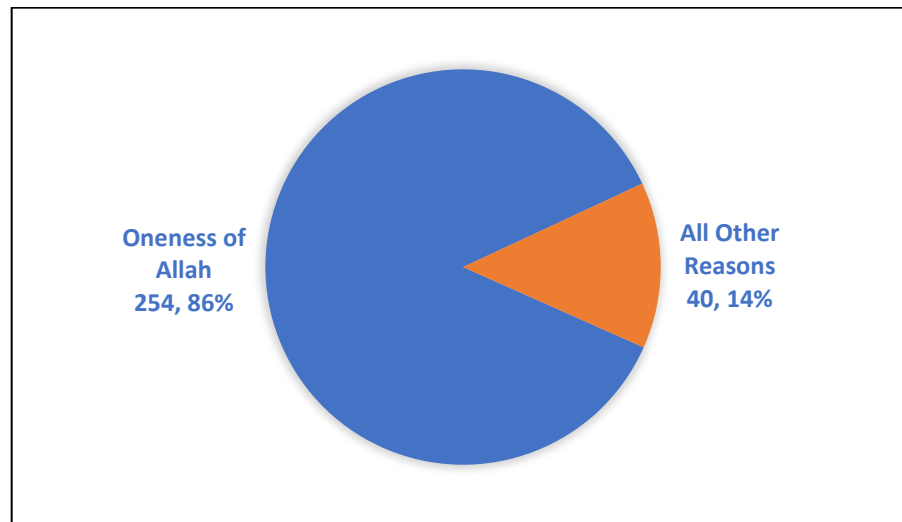


**Figure 12: Fundamental Beliefs About God Post-Adolescence and Before Accepting Islam Among Survey Respondents [n = 294]**

### Motivations for Conversion

There are many reasons as to why people leave the faith they are born in and become Muslim. These reasons typically range from the belief in the Oneness of Allah [*Tawheed*] to the behaviour of Muslims around them. But not all have a higher spiritual calling, some change their

faith so that they can marry a Muslim, whereas others may embrace Islam for some perceived or expected gain. A primary question that this study answers is what are the motivations for African expatriates in Bahrain to convert to Islam? These reasons are then compared to the demographic variables described and upbringing of these converts. Exploring the lives of these African new Muslims and their journey to Islam offers deeper insight into why they are attracted to Islam. So, what is the primary motivator for these individuals to choose Islam?



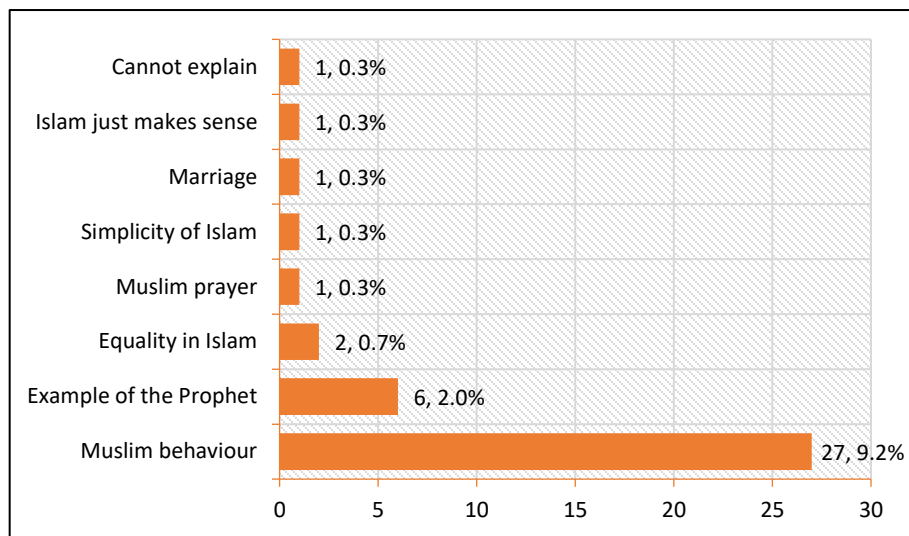
**Figure 13: Major Reason for Converting to Islam given by Respondents [n = 294]**

From the 294 survey respondents, 254, or 86%, selected “Oneness of Allah” as the primary motivation for embracing Islam [see Figure 13]. The rest of the 40 Africans [14%] gave different reasons for becoming Muslim as depicted in Figure 14 below.

It is interesting to note that 215 [73.1%] of the respondents also stated that before becoming Muslim the one thing they learned about Islam was the concept of *Tawheed* – the Oneness of Allah. A further 27 [9.1%] surveyed reported that apart from *Tawheed* they also knew about the “Five Pillars” in Islam. This means that 82.3% of 294 African converts learned about the fundamental role of *Tawheed* in Islam prior to becoming Muslim.

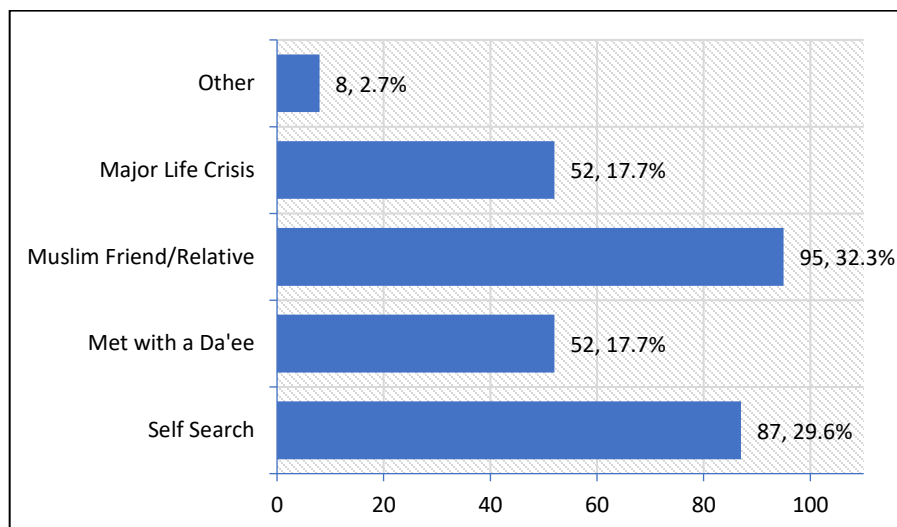
Twenty-seven [9.2%] participants listed “Muslim behaviour” as the primary reason they chose Islam [see Figure 14 below]. Observing the conduct of practicing Muslims, especially in the discipline, integrity, and compassion exhibited in their daily lives may be a source of inspiration for some to want to become Muslim themselves.

Six of the converts [2%] reflected on the example of the Prophet Muhammad as a key reason for their switching faith to Islam. Two respondents [0.7%] choose “equality in Islam” as their principal motivator. The remaining five choose one of each [0.3%] of the following respectively Muslim prayer, simplicity of Islam, Marriage, the logic of Islam [Islam just makes sense], and “cannot explain.”

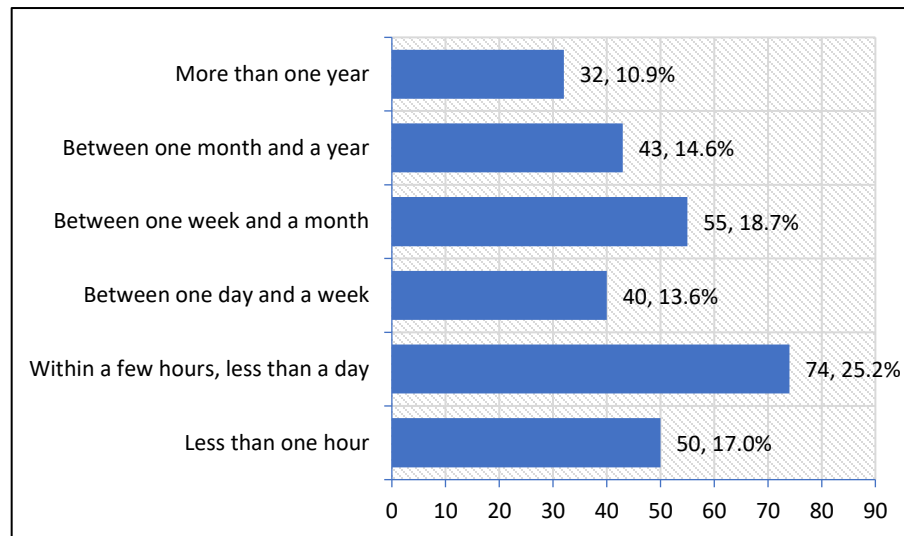


**Figure 14: All Other Reasons for Converting to Islam given by Respondents [n = 40]**

Prior to conversion, 87 [29.6%] of the respondents stated that they were dissatisfied with their religion and started searching for answers [see Figure 15 below]. Fifty-two [17.7%] of the Africans surveyed stated that they faced a major crisis that caused them to reflect on the meaning of life. A similar number [52 or 17.7%] were approached by a Muslim preacher – a *Da'ee* – who prompted them to reflect on their own lives and consequently they responded positively when invited to Islam. Similarly, 32.3% or 95 of those surveyed said that it was a Muslim friend or Muslim relative who encouraged them in their journey to seek answers and in that process, they found Islam.



**Figure 15: What Prompted the Respondents to Seek Islam [n = 294]**



**Figure 16: Time Elapsed between having an “interest in Islam” and “actual conversion to Islam” among the African Converts [n = 294]**

The chart above depicts the amount of time it took the African converts surveyed between learning about Islam and becoming Muslim. It is noteworthy over two-fifths [42.2%] spent a few hours mulling over the decision to become Muslim. Another forty or 13.6% took between a day and week to make this life-changing decision, whereas the remainder of the Africans surveyed [over 44% or 130 respondents] took more than a week to several months and years to decide on switching faith.

## DISCUSSION

The spiritual dimensions of conversion to Islam among African expatriates in Bahrain are central to understanding their motivations. For the overwhelming majority [86%], the concept of *Tawheed* or “Oneness of Allah” is profoundly appealing and immensely liberating. This aligns perfectly well with the Islamic teaching of *Fitrah* – the deeply personal, innate disposition that all human beings possess of wanting to reconnect with their Creator, Allah, glory be to Him, He is Most Exalted.

### ***Tawheed* – the Oneness of Allah**

*Tawheed* is at the heart of Islam; it is the basis upon which all of Islamic theology and even practice is based. The word, *Tawheed*, is rooted in the Arabic term *wahhada*, which means “to unify,” “to make one,” or “to declare oneness.” In the context of Islamic theology, *wahhada* refers to the act of asserting the Oneness of Allah. It signifies acknowledging, understanding, and firmly believing without any doubt that Allah is Unique, Indivisible, and has no partners or equals [Philips, 1994].

One of the shortest chapters of the Qur’an, *Surah Ikhlas*, perfectly encapsulates the concept of *Tawheed*. The Prophet Muhammad [peace be upon him] described it as “equivalent to one-third of the Qur’an,” highlighting its profound theological weight.

The Surah begins with the declaration of Allah’s Unique Oneness: “Say: He, God, is One” [Qur’an 112:1], affirming emphatically and clearly that He, Allah, is One with no partners and no

divisions. The next verse, “God, the Eternally Sufficient unto Himself” [112:2], emphasizes Allah’s complete self-sufficiency and total independence [Nasr, 2015]. It underscores the fact that Allah is fully independent while all of His creation completely depends on Him.

The chapter further addresses one of the most common theological deviations created by humankind – ascribing parentage to and associating partners with Allah. “He begets not, nor was He begotten” [112:3] firmly denies any anthropomorphic attributes of reproduction or familial relationships assigned to Allah, reminding humankind of His absolute transcendence. The final verse, “And none is like unto Him” [112:4], captures and undeniably rejects all comparisons to Allah. *Surah Ikhlas* leaves no doubt about Allah’s Singularity, affirming His absolute distinction, independence, and existence apart from all of His creation [Nasr et al., 2015].

The fact that 254 out of 294 African converts chose *Tawheed* as the primary reason for them having taken Shahadah is of extreme significance. 86% is an overwhelming majority. Yet, when one looks at their childhood, over 98% of them grew up in a Christian household, over 85% attended Church regularly, over 81% attended Bible classes or were taught at home, and more than 90% stated that they were contented with their religious upbringing giving no indication that these Africans were in any way inclined to become Muslim.

The typical Christian Trinitarian doctrine and salvation in the dying of Christ is challenging to understand and even more difficult to logically explain. Consequently, despite a stable Christian nurturing, a majority of the African converts, 73%, questioned these confusing Christian beliefs while growing up. Accordingly, over three-fifths [60.9%] discarded the typical Christian dogma in favour of believing only in the Father, as the One true God and not associating any other partners with Him. By the time these individuals had moved to Bahrain and learned and experienced more, almost three-quarters [74.5%] claimed to believe in only One God. For these Africans, taking the leap to become Muslim was quite easy since their core monotheistic belief aligned perfectly with the Islamic concept of *Tawheed*. This is further demonstrated when one considers that for more than two-fifths [42.9%] of those surveyed the time elapsed between learning about Islam, particularly about the Oneness of Allah, and taking the *Shahadah* is between less than an hour to at most a day. Switching faiths is a life-changing decision not to be taken lightly, yet for so many of the converts to take such a short time to embrace Islam can only be explained in the light of them already having the core Islamic belief of *Tawheed* prior to conversion.

But how does one explain this?

Numerous secular theories attempt to explain the phenomenon of switching religions using various social, psychological, and sometimes even economic reasons. Yet, none of these offer a sufficient explanation that corresponds with such one-sided data. Al-Qwidi [2002] explains that individuals are drawn to Islam because it is in their nature to do so. She hearkens to the Islamic belief of *Fitrah* that states that each human being is endowed with an inherent disposition that wants their human soul to reconnect with its Maker.

Austrian neurologist, psychologist, and philosopher, Victor Frankl [1985] suggested that all human beings have a deeply-held desire to find meaning in life. Frankl’s doctrine of “logotherapy” posited that each individual must search for meaning or purpose in the events

that shape one's life. A Holocaust survivor himself, Frankl wanted his life in a Nazi concentration camp to have meaning. He believed that suffering leads one to look for purpose and have meaning for their existence. And it is only by solving this "existential crisis" that one can ultimately find fulfilment and happiness. Could it be that Frankl, had unknowingly stumbled upon Fitrah?

### ***Fitrah – Innate Disposition to seek one's Creator***

The majority of African expatriates reported a sense of spiritual fulfilment and guidance upon embracing Islam. This matches well with the concept of Fitrah, which implies that all humans have a deeply held inclination toward recognizing and worshipping a Single Creator.

Allah states in the Qur'an [Nasr et al., 2015]:

*And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness concerning themselves, "Am I not your Lord?" they said, "Yea, we bear witness"—lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "Truly of this we were heedless."*

This verse explicitly declares that all of humanity made a covenant with their Lord prior to their earthly life testifying that Allah is their Lord and Master. Allah brought forth all the children of Adam and made them testify against themselves, by responding to the question "Am I your Lord?" To which they all replied "Yea, we bear witness." In this way they held themselves accountable where on the "Day of Resurrection" no human being can ignorantly claim, "Truly of this we were heedless." This verse directly connects to the concept of fitrah. Although human beings do not recall making this pre-temporal covenant, their bearing witness to Allah's Lordship left a mark upon their souls that cannot be erased. It created and established a spiritual connection whereby all human beings would be drawn to their Creator and would want to worship Him. The Prophet [peace be upon him] explained that all human beings are created on this Fitrah, and it is only through their primary socialization that they are taught to be Jews, or Christians or other faiths.

*Abu Hurairah reported the Messenger of Allah [May peace be upon him] said: "No child is born but upon Fitrah. His parents make him a Jew, or a Christian, or a Magian. As an animal delivers a child with limbs intact, do you detect any flaws?" [Al-Bukhari 4775, nd].*

Allah states in the Qur'an, Chapter 30, Verse 30 [Nasr et al., 2015]:

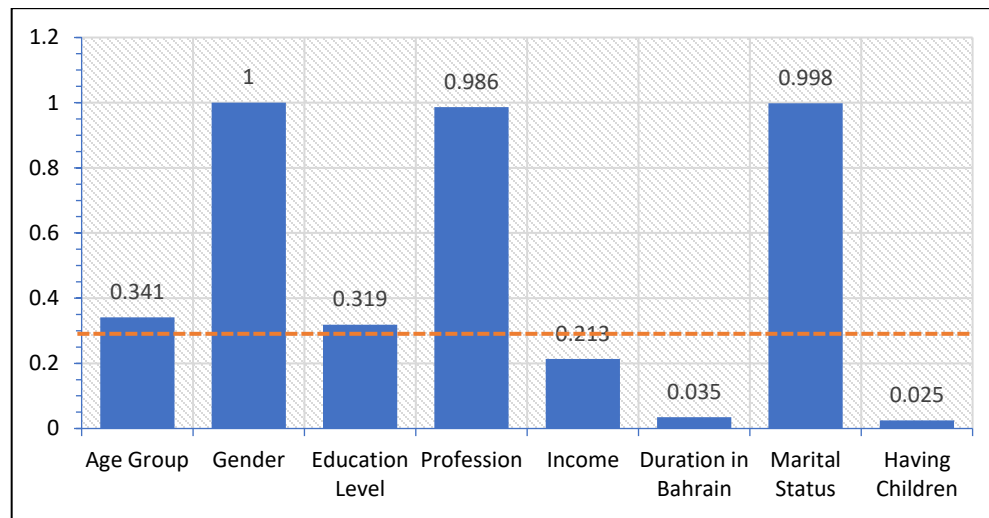
*Set thy face to religion as a ḥanif, in the primordial nature from God upon which He originated mankind – there is no altering the creation of God; that is the upright religion, but most of mankind know not.*

To "set thy face to religion" implies to direct one's entire being to obey and worship Allah. This verse is taken by the majority of commentators of the Qur'an as commanding all individuals to follow the religion created by Allah for all human beings – Islam. "*Hanif*" means the "one who is inclined toward worshipping only One God", whereas "primordial nature" refers to one's innate disposition or "*fitrah*."

Understanding the concept of *Fitrah* and how it relates to *Tawheed* helps answer the question as to why so many Africans are drawn to Islam in Bahrain. A further question would be to examine if there is any link between the demographic profile of the African convert to *Tawheed* as the primary reason for accepting Islam?

### Statistical Analysis of Correlations Between Demographics and *Tawheed*

A statistical correlations study between demographic variables and *Tawheed* [Oneness of Allah] as the primary reason for becoming Muslim was conducted for the 294 recent converts with chi-square tests and effect size metrics used to assess the relationships.



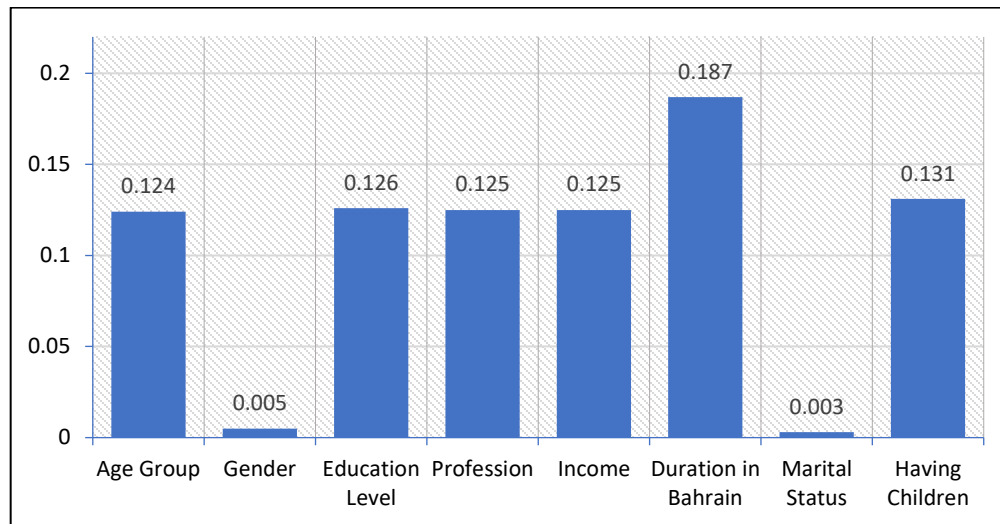
**Figure 17: Chi-Square Test P-Values of Demographic Variables in Correlation with Oneness of Allah, with  $p=0.05$  Threshold Highlighted as a Dashed Line**

As illustrated in Figure 17. above, a Chi-Square test for independence suggests that out of the eight variables studied, only two, “Having Children,” and “Duration in Bahrain” displayed a p-value below the threshold, indicating some statistically significant correlation. Whereas the Cramer’s V effect sizes [Figure 18] suggest that apart from “Gender” and “Marital Status” the other demographic variables have values above a small effect size [Effect size  $\geq 0.1$ ]. Both “Having Children” and “Duration in Bahrain” show slightly higher effect size suggesting that these two demographic factors may play some role in why *Tawheed* is a key motivation for most Africans accepting Islam.

Having children greatly changes one’s outlook on life – not only does it mean greater responsibility for taking care of another human being but also the realization that one’s own life is limited and that there has to be a greater purpose for existence. Becoming a parent may make one think of the bigger questions of existence and purpose and could possibly result in uncovering one’s true nature – *Fitrah* – thereby realizing that there can be only One God who created oneself and one’s offspring.

African expatriates who have lived longer in Bahrain would likely be more exposed to the local culture and religion than those who have very recently migrated to this island nation. Learning about Islam would inevitably mean knowing about the strict belief in the Oneness of Allah and this may appeal to one’s innate nature [*Fitrah*]. This would explain the small degree of

correlation between “Duration in Bahrain” and the primary motivation of *Tawheed* for accepting Islam.



**Figure 18: Cramer's V Effect Sizes of Demographic Variables in Correlation with *Tawheed***

Although the correlations above are statistically significant given the small sample size [in the case of “Having Children” even smaller when one considers that only two thirds of the respondents had offspring] one needs to be cautious not to give too much credence to this finding. Further studies are needed to verify whether these demographic variables do have a great impact on the reasons for accepting Islam.

One facet of conversion that seems to be found among the African converts is a desire for change. These individuals, regardless of motivation, believed that by becoming Muslim they were improving their lives. Apart from almost three-quarters [73%] of the respondents having doubts about their Christian doctrinal upbringing, almost half the respondents [47.3%] either embarked on a journey of self-discovery or were prompted by some crises in their lives that caused them to reflect on the purpose of their existence and seek answers. Another 35.4% were urged on a similar quest by family, friends, or a *Da'ee*; and they also sought guidance [see Figure 15]. In all these cases, it implies that these were people who choose to look for their reason or purpose of existence. All 294 African converts surveyed did not stumble into Islam, they sought guidance, and Allah guided them to Islam.

### **Guidance or *Hedaya***

Guidance is a central theme found throughout the Qur'an. *Hedaya* [also spelled *Hidayah*, *Hidayah*, or *Hedayat*] is the Qur'anic term for guidance, and particularly refers to Divine guidance from Allah. It is Allah who guides people to submit to Him. In the opening chapter of the Qur'an, Surah Fatiha, one supplicates, “Guide us upon the straight path.” Many other verses of the Qur'an declare that guidance is from Allah.

*This is the Book in which there is no doubt, a guidance for the reverent... [Nasr et al., 2015, 2:2]*

*When My servants ask thee about Me, truly I am near. I answer the call of the caller when he calls Me. So, let them respond to Me and believe in Me, that they may be led aright [guided] [Nasr et al., 2015, 2:186].*

*Thou [O Prophet] art not tasked with their guidance, but God guides whomsoever He will... [Nasr et al., 2015, 2:272]*

*Whomsoever God wishes to guide; He expands his breast for submission. And whomsoever He wishes to lead astray, He makes his breast narrow and constricted, as if he were climbing to the sky. Thus, does God heap defilement upon those who do not believe [Nasr et al., 2015, 6:125].*

*...Whomsoever God guides, he is rightly guided; and whomsoever He leads astray, thou wilt find no protector to lead him aright [Nasr et al., 2015, 18:17].*

The concept of *Hedaya* is mentioned throughout the Qur'an, including, but not limited to verses: 2:142; 2:213; 3:101; 4:68; 4:175; 5:16; 6:87; 7:178; 9:115; 10:25; 16:93; 17:97; 18:13; 24:46; 25:31; 28:56; 29:69; 35:8; 39:23; 43:61; and 67:22 [Nasr et al., 2015].

For the African convert to Islam, *Hedaya* is granted to them by Allah, and they choose to become Muslim. The three Islamic concepts of *Tawheed*, *Fitrah*, and *Hedaya* are clearly demonstrated in the findings.

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this study highlight the importance *Tawheed*, *Fitrah* and *Hedaya* with respect to Africans converting to Islam in Bahrain. These findings can have major repercussions on how Da'ees invite people to Islam [Da'wah], in particular Christians from Sub-Saharan African countries who live in the Gulf.

Da'wah is a collective religious obligation [*Fard Kifayah*] on the Muslim community. It was the primary purpose for tens of thousands of messengers and prophets that Allah sent to humankind. The central message of the Qur'an is Da'wah – guiding humanity to their true purpose – to worship Allah. In *Surah An-Nahl*, Allah instructs.

*Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation. And dispute with them in the most virtuous manner. Surely thy Lord is He Who knows best those who stray from His way, and He knows best the rightly guided [Nasr et al., 2015, 16:125]*

Who, when, where, and how to call people to their Lord is fundamental to the success of the *Da'wah* effort. Over the past few decades, the methods and strategies used by the *Da'ees*, while fundamentally upholding the principles found in this verse and following the example of the Prophet Muhammad [peace be upon him], have kept up with the different and new ways in how people communicate. Are there any strategies and tactics of *Da'wah* that may be developed from the findings of this study?

One primary takeaway from this study is the tremendous magnitude of *Tawheed*. This most fundamental of Islamic concepts is intricately tied to the *Fitrah*, every human's yearning to connect with their Creator and to worship Him exclusively. It is not insignificant such a large

portion of those surveyed cited *Tawheed* as the primary motivator and that an almost equal number already held monotheistic beliefs. Da'wah should therefore capitalize on people's inherent appeal of *Tawheed*. The concept of the Oneness of Allah transcends people's identities and upbringing especially in the case of African Christians. Consequently, Da'wah approaches built on the concept of *Tawheed*, such as the GORAP method\*, and appealing to people's Fitrah can be most effective.

Another major conclusion of the study is identifying people who are already "Muslim" but just not aware of it. These are individuals who believe in One God exclusively. They do not associate partners with God. The overwhelming majority in this study were originally Christian and a very large number of them were born into Catholic families. Catholic doctrine is difficult to understand even amongst the learned, yet despite a lot of confusion, the majority of Catholics have a basic belief in God. As the findings imply, most African Christians, and Catholics in particular, are inclined to accept the simplicity of the Oneness of God in Islam over the complications and confusion they find in their birth-faith. The question then is, "Are there other faith communities, whether in Bahrain, in the Gulf, or other parts of the world, that would have similar characteristics to the African converts surveyed and therefore be inclined to embrace Islam?"

An unpublished doctoral thesis conducted by the author suggests that the Filipino community in Bahrain is similarly inclined to Islam for the same reasons as the African community [Harunani, 2025]. Studies on African and Filipino expatriates in other Gulf countries may shed more light on whether this phenomenon of conversion to Islam that is related to *Tawheed* and *Fitrah* is unique to Bahrain or has greater regional appeal. Do these fundamental Islamic concepts have appeal to other faith groups like Buddhists, Hindus, and other religions like they do to Christians? There is huge scope for further research in seeing if these concepts have universal appeal or are limited to only certain faith groups.

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\* GORAP stands for God, Oneness, Revelation, and Prophethood. Da'ees encourage people to reflect on their own lives and seek purpose for their existence leading to a conversation about God and eventually about how God is One and has sent His messengers and revelations to guide humanity back to Him.

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