



Religious Experience and Ritualisation

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In Christian theology, the word 'conversion' refers to a religious experience that causes a life-changing transformation. This understanding, applied by Evangelical Christians for several centuries, fits within the Pauline paradigm associated with Paul's vision on the road to Damascus (Rambo, 2003:213). However, Hindu traditions understand conversion differently, for they think it is often the ritual practice that affects people. In the same vein, my work demonstrates the transformative power of ritualisation on individuals, a power very different from Paul's sudden conversion experience. In this article, I seek to examine the relationship between ritualisation and conversion and will propose an analytical framework that may be useful for identifying the powers of ritualisation that influence an individual's entry into groups that are rooted in everyday rituals. To analyse the observations emerging from my fieldwork in European centres of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) from 2011 to 2013, I mainly draw upon C. Bell's theory of ritualisation and P. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*.

Keywords: ritual; ritualisation; conversion; rites: ISKCON;

This study is concerned with the processes by which individuals from a Western background enter the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), a transnational religious movement with its roots in Chaitanya Vaishnavism, a Hindu tradition originating in India. Ritual practice plays a crucial role in conversion experiences that facilitate entry into Hindu traditions rooted in everyday rituals. These conversion experiences are often quite different from religious experiences in Christianity. R. Robinson and S. Clarke (2003:1-18) turn to religious conversion in India and explore the diversity of religious practice in India, including conversions to Islam, Jainism, Christianity, and a number of Hindu denominations. They conclude that changes of religious identity, especially those outside Christianity, are often incompatible with the Pauline paradigm. In keeping with Robinson and Clarke, my work suggests that the Christian model is only one option. In the following paragraphs, I explain ISKCON's background and its ritual practice, which is rooted in the Chaitanya tradition. Furthermore, my overview of the everyday rituals as practised by ISKCON adherents offers a basic understanding of the practices that inform the case studies and dynamics associated with the dimensions of ritual power.

My research, a study of 'conversion' to ISKCON, examines the role of ritual within the processes of entry into groups in which everyday ritual practice plays a central role. Daily rites in the ISKCON context facilitate the internalisation of ISKCON's central values and worldviews. This is made possible through the entrant's initial exposure to its rituals, his/her search for meaning behind these rituals, gradual acceptance of ISKCON's schemes of ritualisation, and over the long-term, acquisition of ritual mastery.

My work suggests a distinction between two categories of rituals: rites of passage performed to celebrate life changing events, and everyday ritual practice. Contemporary scholarship on conversion focuses mainly on the first category, which Van Gennep (1960:10) classifies as 'rites of passage'. In Christianity, baptism, marriage, and funerals are typical 'rites of passage'. The most important rites of passage in an ISKCON context are the initiation rituals. Apart from initiation, however, the daily ritual performance of ISKCON adherents involves ritual chanting, *prasadam* rites, and deity worship; these belong to a very different category of ritual. Ritual is both a doorway for coming in contact with ISKCON and a crucial practice for entrants to make progress from the status of neophyte to novice and to qualify for successive initiation rituals. The rituals, enacted on a daily basis, pervade the entire existence of the performer. Contrary to the limited role of sacraments in Christian and *samskaras* in Hindu traditions, the daily ritual practice performed in ISKCON plays a crucial role in directing the entry process.

Chaitanya Vaishnavism and ISKCON

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), known in the West as the Hare Krishna movement, is a branch of the Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition within Hinduism. Its theology is based on doctrines derived from the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Bhagavata Purana*, and the tradition's essential practice, among several other forms of *bhakti* (a religious path of devotion), involves the chanting of God's holy names. The tradition believes that Chaitanya, understood to be an incarnation of Krishna, appeared over five hundred years ago in the form of a devotee of Krishna to propagate the chanting of God's holy names. ISKCON claims continuity with the main branch of Chaitanya's mission, a connection established through a preceptorial line of spiritual masters coming down from Chaitanya to A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (the founder of ISKCON) and which continues through his disciples and grand-disciples. It is, therefore, ISKCON's primary aim to further Chaitanya's mission by spreading the congregational chanting (*sankirtana*) of the holy names of God as the easiest and most sublime spiritual practice for developing love for God.

From its inception in New York in 1966 to the present day, ISKCON spans nearly half a century of growth and worldwide expansion. It all began in 1965 with the arrival of Bhaktivedanta, the founder of ISKCON, at Boston harbour on board a cargo ship from India. At seventy years of age, with forty Indian rupees in his possession, he attempted to carry out the request of his guru to teach Krishna consciousness to the English-speaking world.¹ After a stay in the small town of Butler, at the home of an acquaintance's son, he moved to New York, where he attracted followers by his

¹ 'Krishna consciousness' refers to offering all one's activities to the deity Krishna with devotion.

presentation of Vaishnavism, a branch of Hinduism that centres on worship of Vishnu, or Krishna.² These followers opened a second centre in San Francisco. Soon after that, centres in Montreal, Boston, Santa Fe, and London were opened. From 1969 to 1973, temples were established in North America, Europe, South America, Mexico, Africa, and India. The seventies were characterized by an exponential growth of the movement.³ It was a time of establishing temples worldwide and recruiting new members.⁴ The acquisition of Bhaktivedanta Manor in London (a property donated by George Harrison) and the making of an LP record with the Beatles, were events that boosted the spread of the movement in Great Britain. From 1970 to 1977, major temples were constructed at the pilgrimage sites of Mayapur and Vrindavana in India, and a big temple in Bombay (now Mumbai) was built at Juhu Beach. At the time of Bhaktivedanta's demise in 1977, more than one hundred ISKCON centres were started, about five thousand disciples were initiated, and millions of copies of the *Bhagavad Gita* and sets of the first nine cantos of the *Bhagavata Purana* were printed and distributed. The expansion of the movement, although less exponential than during the 1970s, continued in the following decades. While ISKCON has never conducted a statistical survey of its membership numbers and profiles, it is noteworthy that the ISKCON temple directory presently (early 2015) lists more than four hundred temples worldwide.⁵ Thousands of congregation members conduct regular meetings in their homes.

Every Day Rituals

When newcomers enter ISKCON, they learn the daily ritual practices such as the chanting of God's names. They also learn to respect ISKCON's dietary restrictions and taboos. They attempt to adhere to the regulations that are strictly followed by ISKCON initiates. Initiates are required to chant a minimum of sixteen rounds daily without fail, and are strictly prohibited from (1) meat consumption, (2) illicit sex, (3) the use of intoxicants, and (4) gambling, or in ISKCON parlance, 'the four regulated principles'. Newcomers drawn to ISKCON's way of life seek to adhere to these regulations.

The tradition's essential practices involve chanting God's holy names: *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare* and making food offerings to the Hindu deity Krishna (these are referred to as *prasadam* rites). G. Beck (1995:9) notes that sacred sound in Hindu-related traditions, in whichever form or name, is almost always involved in the 'salvific' process to attain liberation, or release, known as *moksha*. In particular Gaudiya theology is concerned with the 'theology of sound' and relies on the Hindu conception that 'speech

² At odds with many Hindu traditions who commonly believe Krishna to be incarnation of Vishnu, the Chaitanya tradition considers Krishna to be the origin of Vishnu and all his further incarnations.

³ Cole (2007:30-35) offers an account of the first Hare Krishnas entering the UK and gives a summary of the history in the 1970s.

⁴ In 1970 new temples were opened in Tokyo, Sydney, Hamburg, Honolulu and Paris. In 1973 preaching started in Nairobi in Africa. 1973 was a year of expansion of centres all over the world. This list is based on information gathered from the biography of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami compiled by Goswami (1980; 1987).

⁵ Source: <http://www.krishna.com/how-many-people-follow-krishna-consciousness> Accessed on: 20 May 2016.

is an act of power' (1995:205).⁶ Sacred sound in the form of the chanting of the holy names of Krishna is the core spiritual practice of the Hare Krishna movement. It is based on the idea that the chanting of the names of God, i.e. 'Hare', 'Krishna', and 'Rama', are full of unlimited spiritual potency and that chanting them will purify the mind of all impurities such as envy, greed, anger, madness, illusion, and fear, and will help the practitioner to develop devotion.⁷

The tradition explains the purifying power of the mantra in theological terms. Verse *Adi-lila* 17.22 of *Chaitanya Charitamrita* (Bhaktivedanta, 2012c) declares that in this iron age of Kali, the Hare Krishna *maha-mantra* (great mantra) is an incarnation of Krishna, and that simply by chanting this mantra one associates directly with Krishna, and will be liberated. It is, however, understood that the chanting will only have a transformational effect if done with due care and attention,⁸ in an attitude of humble and selfless service. In addition one has to guard against numerous offences (*aparadhas*), or unfavourable mental attitudes. Therefore the correct performance of the chanting ritual depends not only on correct pronunciation of the mantra but also, and more importantly, on maintaining an appropriate attitude of submissive humility, an inner disposition believed to be critical to the efficacy of the rite. The ultimate purpose of the chanting is to achieve love of Krishna. It is maintained that this aim will only be achieved if one chants the holy names in a pure state of consciousness (*suddha-nama*). To attain this purity of consciousness, one needs to be first cleansed of the karmic 'dirt' accumulated over countless lifetimes. Offences to the name (*nama-aparadha*) must be avoided before one can chant in a purified state of consciousness.⁹

The chanting takes mainly two forms. The first form of chanting is *japa*, and relates to the individual chanting of the Hare Krishna *mantra*. The Sanskrit word *man-tra* refers, according to the tradition, to a prayer that delivers the mind from materialistic attitudes. Olivelle (2003:478) notes that *mantra* is used as a tool for meditation and for salvation. Lipner (1994:52) explains the meaning of *mantra* as follows: 'It is a characteristic belief of religious Hindus that the power of the Sanskrit Word is encapsulated in the *mantra*... The term is often explained as deriving from some word meaning to save, e.g. *tri*, to pass over, float, and *trai*, to protect, rescue. *Man* has to do with the mind, so laconically the *man-tra* is a rescuing or protecting mental instrument of some kind.'

Initiated devotees take a vow to chant the Hare Krishna *mantra* at least 1,728 times (16 rounds counted on a 108-bead rosary called *japamala*) each day. The chanting is done using beads kept in a (bead-) bag that has a little hole in it to stick out the index

⁶ Beck (1995:9) points out that the explication of the structures and semantics of sacred prescribed sounds within Hindu religious thought has not yet been thoroughly explored.

⁷ Tambiah (1968:85-188), argues that ritual words are different from ordinary speech: 'The difference was that magical utterances were believed to produce supernatural effects which they did not expect ordinary speech to produce' (1968:186).

⁸ This is in keeping with Smith's (2005:33) observation that 'ritual is, first and foremost a mode of paying attention. Attention is the most fundamental component of ritual'.

⁹ These offences are: (1) blaspheming against devotees of Krishna, (2) considering Lord Krishna to be on par with (rather than superior to) other divinities, and believing that there are gods other than Krishna, (3) neglecting the orders of the spiritual master, (4) minimising the authority of the scriptures (the Vedas), (5) interpreting the holy names of God, (6) committing sins on the strength of chanting, (7) instructing the glories of the Lord's names to the unfaithful, (8) chanting of the holy names to fulfil desires for sense enjoyment, (9) being inattentive while chanting the holy name, (10) not having complete faith in the chanting of the holy names and remaining attached to physical and mental enjoyment (Bhaktivedanta, 2012k).

finger. In this way the index finger, which remains unused, supports the bead-bag. The middle finger and thumb are used to finger through the rosary a hundred and eight times. The beads are usually made of neem-wood or the wood of the *tulasi* (holy basil) plant.

Japa, is a simple form of meditation based on repeating the mantra silently. The mantra is pronounced just loud enough to allow the speaker to hear the mantra clearly. During the individual mantra meditation the person focuses the mind on the mantra while simultaneously removing or ignoring any other thoughts that enter the mind. After the recitation of each mantra, the chanter moves his finger to the next bead of the rosary, which contains 108 beads in total. When s/he reaches the 108th bead, then the chanter moves up a bead on a separate 'counting rosary'. The counting rosary, compared to the 108-bead 'chanting rosary', comprises generally only sixteen beads representing the minimum of sixteen rounds that initiated ISKCON adherents vow to chant daily. Once the individual has acquired the ability to chant and repeat the mantra quickly, then the chanting of sixteen rounds usually takes less than two hours.

In temples, the *japa* chanting is usually done collectively between five and seven in the morning. The activity of combined *japa*-chanting produces a sound resembling the noise of a beehive. It creates a particular atmosphere. Some chant while seated cross-legged in the yogic lotus pose, and others walk up and down. At home, the chanting is done before a shrine or in one's private quarters. Sometimes, individuals chant *japa* outdoors, while going for a walk. The '*japa*-chanting' is a ritual with a repetitive character, which, if done in a group, creates also a social dimension. ISKCON adherents in temples often claim that *japa*-chanting in the association of many is more inspiring than chanting alone. In addition, it is an opportunity to show others the seriousness of one's vow to chant the maha-mantra for up to sixteen rounds daily.

The second form of the chanting is *sankirtan* or the congregational chanting of the holy names. This *sankirtan* (sometimes also called *harinama*) was introduced by Chaitanya (1486-1534), who required his followers to go into the streets and collectively sing their praises of Krishna. When the movement started in America, *sankirtan* in the form of chanting the holy names in public and book distribution (also called *sankirtan*) became the main methods of promoting the Hare Krishna movement (Rochford, 1985:11-12).

Sankirtan (or *kirtan* in brief) is often one of the first things that individuals encounter when they visit an ISKCON centre. During *kirtan*, many sing the mantra accompanied by traditional Indian musical instruments such as *mridanga* (an Indian percussion instrument), *kartalas* (small cymbals), and harmonium, a hand-powered organ. The singing of the holy names involves a number of people. One individual leads the singing by chanting the mantra in a melodious tune, and the audience responds by repeating the mantra in the same melody. This form of singing is often combined with singing *bhajans* or devotional songs. *Kirtan*, as well as *prasadam*, are the hallmarks of all ISKCON temple programmes and ISKCON organised events. As noted previously, when Bhaktivedanta introduced this chanting in America in 1965 and 1966, Allen Ginsberg helped to popularise the chanting. As a result the chanting became

popular among psychedelic bands in California, and in 1968 the mantra was also sung in the Broadway musical *Hair* and in George Harrison's hit, 'My Sweet Lord'.¹⁰

In brief, it is a core belief of the tradition that Krishna's name and Krishna are non-different. The deity in the form of his names is believed to purify the chanter by removing negative thoughts and emotions such as lust, anger, and greed from his or her mind.

A second daily ritual performed by ISKCON adherents is the worship of the deity also referred to as *archa-vigraha*. Bhaktivedanta, in his commentary on the eight mantra of *Sri Isopanisad*,¹¹ explains that Krishna and other deities 'visibly materialise as *archa-avatara*, images which are expanded forms of Krishna that are non-different from him' (Bhaktivedanta, 2012e). In ISKCON temples, every morning around 4:30 a.m., the deity is worshiped in a ceremony called *mangala arotika*, or the daily auspicious pre-dawn worship honouring the deity. For thirty minutes, *Brahmin* priests offer incense, ghee lamps, water, flowers, and other articles to the deities while the devotees sing songs in praise of the deity and the guru. The adoration of the image is a form of *bhakti* or devotion in which one delights in ritual worship (*puja*) of the deity, through various practices of honouring and serving the image, such as bathing it, dressing it, offering food, and singing and dancing before it (Lipner, 1994:278).

The ritual worship of deities is more than the mere following of a set of rules. The worshiper interacts with the deity's images (understood to be no different than the deity), and develops attachment to them. It is a meditative process. Contemplation of the image is especially cultivated through techniques of mental visualisation (Lipner, 1994:314). Interaction with the deity is subtle and takes place in the mind. The devotees offer warm or light clothes to the deities according to the season, they pray to them, and perceive their smiles. The purpose of the practice is to remember Krishna by experiencing the purifying presence of the deity mentally and visually.

Central to rituals of image worship is the offering of food to the deity, which is then distributed among devotees, and consumed as *prasadam*. Fuller (1992:74) explains *prasadam* as the symbol of the deity's power and grace. During *puja*, the food offering is understood to be consumed by the deity in its image form. The 'leftovers' are understood to have been ritually transmuted to become *prasadam* imbued with divine power. The *prasadam* is distributed among devotees, who, by ingesting this food, partake of the deity's bounty and grace.

ISKCON is famous for its *prasadam*, sanctified food offered to Krishna. The lacto-vegetarian food of the Hare Krishna movement, prepared with great care and skill, is famous all over the world and available in its temples as well as in the worldwide network of Govinda's restaurants. ISKCON also runs free food distribution

¹⁰ Even at George Harrison's death, the news media continued to associate him with Krishna's name, playing 'My Sweet Lord', which ends with the *mahamantra* (Goswami, 2012:180).

¹¹ The Upanisads form the fourth constituent group of texts related to each of the four Vedas *Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva*. *Sri Isopanisad* is related to the *Yajur Veda*. Upanisads were composed between about 600 and 300 BCE. They evaluate the nature of the rituals related to each Veda, seeing its internalisation within the individual as its highest meaning, and subordinating ritual action to knowledge (Flood, 1996:36, 40,75).

programmes, 'Food for Life', in many countries.¹² Individuals also come in contact with ISKCON through vegetarian cooking courses organised in centres all over the world.

The prepared food belongs mainly to the category of *sattvik* foods and includes butter, milk, rice, chickpeas, lentils, beans, fruits and vegetables.¹³ Cooking for the pleasure of Krishna, offering prepared food to the deity, and engaging in the meditative activity of eating, are all aimed at purifying the practitioners and making them conscious of Krishna, an activity conducive for developing love of Krishna, the ultimate purpose of all pursuits of the Hare Krishna movement.¹⁴ Following is a summary of Caroline's interview, a story representing the most common pattern of 'conversion' into ISKCON – a gradual entry guided by increasing levels of social interaction with ISKCON adherents.

Case Study

Caroline (Swiss, aged 38) was in her mid-twenties and was studying law at a university in Switzerland. She was on a search for what she thought to be 'genuine spirituality'. In 1998, she decided to quit her studies and go to India to search for the truths which she expected to find in Buddhism. In India she came in contact with ISKCON devotees. During that journey, Caroline visited ISKCON temples in Bangalore (Karnataka), and Vrindavana (Uttar Pradesh).¹⁵ While travelling through India, Caroline arrived in Bangalore and bought, from a bookstore of the ISKCON temple, the book *Krishna, The Supreme Personality of Godhead*, a work describing Krishna's earthly pastimes. A few days later she also bought a copy of *Bhagavad Gita As It Is* from the bookstand in the ISKCON temple in Vrindavana.¹⁶

After her first visit to India, in 1999, Caroline felt inspired to study theology at university. It was during that time that she decided to knock on the door of the Hare Krishna temple in Zurich. With the *Bhagavad Gita* in her hand she asked if someone could explain its meaning to her. The ISKCON devotee who opened the door invited her in and discussed with her the contents of the *Bhagavad Gita*. He also introduced her to the chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra with chanting beads (*japa-mala*). Newcomers become quickly introduced to the power of the chanting, which is believed to purify or destroy one's karmic burden. Often during the first contact, the chanting is explained

¹² ISKCON's free vegetarian food programme for the homeless and disadvantaged, called 'Food for Life', served at least 900 million meals between 1966-95 in 60 countries (Cole, 2007:47).

¹³ *Sattvik* food is described in *Bhagavad Gita*, verse 17.8 as food dear to those who are good and pure. According to Bhaktivedanta, it increases the duration of life, purifies one's existence and gives strength, happiness and satisfaction. Such foods are juicy, fatty, wholesome, and pleasing to the heart (Bhaktivedanta, 2012a).

¹⁴ For Vaishnavas, to eat *prasadam* is to recognize one's position as a servant of Krishna. It is believed that *prasadam* is 'contaminated' with Krishna's saliva and that it 'contaminates the eater in a positive way with divine qualities' (Broo, 2003:252).

¹⁵ Vrindavana is a sacred Vaishnava pilgrimage site. It was in the ISKCON temple in Vrindavana that Caroline became attracted to the chanting of the holy names of Krishna and felt inspired to follow the simple life of the personalities living there. She acquired a taste for the regulated daily morning temple programme, including the hearing of lectures and discussions of the scriptures.

¹⁶ Books are often one of the first items of newcomers' contact with ISKCON. Caroline read them and became intrigued by the philosophy.

simply in terms of the purifying nature of the ritual.¹⁷ The negative rites in the form of taboos and restrictions are often explained later.

Soon after that conversation, Caroline started to regularly attend the Sunday programme at the temple in Zurich. She was gradually introduced to ISKCON practices through socialisation with ISKCON devotees. A devotee gave her a present, a *japa-mala* (a loop of chanting beads) and a bead-bag in which to keep them, at a Sunday programme at the Zurich temple. Caroline was overjoyed to receive the gift, but the devotee was too busy with other visitors to explain how she should chant using her new beads. Thus, she approached a *brahmacari* (celibate monk) who explained the art of individual meditation through chanting with beads. Notwithstanding Caroline's introduction to the practical aspects of the chanting and the counting on beads, she did not take up the practice wholeheartedly until a few months later in India.

During these first contacts, Caroline not only asked practical questions, but also philosophical ones. Having studied at university, Caroline was acquainted with philosophers such as Voltaire, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, and Emerson. She was convinced that the ability to think was the essence of the individual being, *cogito ergo sum*. When, however, the devotee who gave her the chanting beads told her about a book *Sri Manah-siksha*, Caroline became confused as the book narrates a story of the *atman* preaching to the mind. She felt strange – as if it was schizophrenic: 'How can I preach to my mind? I am the mind!' After her study of *Bhagavad Gita*, she gradually accepted the tradition's theological ideas claiming the existence of a metaphysical self capable of directing the mind through intelligence. *Sri Manah-siksha* is a book written by Raghunatha dasa Goswami, one of the six Goswamis of Vrindavana, all direct followers of Chaitanya. It is a prayer urging the mind to always focus its attention on Krishna. This quotation is cited in *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, verse 2.8.63 (Bhaktivedanta, 2012c).

While attending the ISKCON Sunday programmes in Zurich, Caroline continued to study theology at the university. One day she learnt that her professor was an atheist. This fact upset her so much that, in the year 2000, she decided to quit her studies and go back to Vrindavana where she took up the study of ISKCON Chaitanya Vaishnava scriptures at the Vrindavana Institute for Higher Education (VIHE).

During her earlier visit to India, Caroline had joined a group of ISKCON devotees on a pilgrimage tour to Badrinath, Kedarnath and Vrindavana. She had arrived in Vrindavana during the month of *Kartika* (October-November), where she had taken courses on the *Bhagavad Gita* presented by senior spiritual instructors.¹⁸ These courses were so appealing to her that during her subsequent visit in 2000, she decided to follow a complete four-month *bhakti-sastri* course, a programme of study focused on the study of *Bhagavad Gita* and three other major books discussing the theology of the Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition. Caroline describes her study experiences during the *bhakti-sastri* course in India in the following words:

¹⁷ Newcomers' first experience with the chanting could be compared to the daily ritual cleansing of the temple by the members of the Japanese Tenrikyo Buddhist tradition, a ritual practice representing an internal process of sweeping dust from the mind. Ian Reader (2005:93-96) claims that the Tenrikyo cleaning rite also serves to generate a sense of community.

¹⁸ *Kartik*: a holy period during which many Vaishnava celebrations take place, and during which ISKCON organizes special courses and seminars in Vrindavana (Uttar Pradesh, India).

During the *bhakti-sastri* course in Vrindavana, I was a complete newcomer. I had still the prefix *bhaktin* before my first name indicating that I had no spiritual master yet. Yet I was allowed to follow the course in the association of many advanced Vaisnavis (female devotees). Also following the regulated daily worship programme starting with *mangala-arotika*—the early morning ceremony held in front of the deities Sri-Sri-Radha-Syamasundara—for four months, touched my heart and gave me the desire to follow that process with all seriousness.

Caroline's passage from novitiate to initiated member is marked by a series of developments. These include following daily schemes of ritual practice, completing an introductory course, adopting Vaishnava dress, and accepting the guidance of an ISKCON guru. The schemes of ritual practice involve the following of the morning and evening temple programmes, (a schedule of different ritual practices including greeting of the deities, *puja*, *japa*, *kirtan*, recitation of the scriptures, the ritual offering and the eating of sacrificed food, and *guru puja*), all of which comprise a chain of daily rites preparing the practitioner for high levels of ritual mastery.¹⁹

In Zurich, Caroline followed a *bhakta*-course, an introductory course for new entrants to Krishna consciousness. Such an introductory course educates the novice in aspects of philosophy and practice. The seminar addresses five major elements of philosophy discussed in *Bhagavad Gita* (*jiva* [the living entity]; *prakriti* [nature]; *kala* [time]; *isvara* [God as controller]; and *karma* [the work and the reaction of work]) and the practice in terms of positive and negative rites and life-style (the daily schedule; the principles behind the four regulative principles; the four regulated principles analysed in detail; the practice of hearing and chanting; the principles of deity worship; the festivals; the rites in relation to *prasadam*; the missionary activities; and the etiquette in relationships). The Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition explains the ideas behind the practice of the four prohibitive principles as being based on 'four pillars of religion: austerity, cleanliness, mercy, and truthfulness.' Bhaktivedanta (2012d) explains these principles in his commentary to *Bhagavata Purana* 1.17.45.

The seminar was presented by the same person who gave Caroline her first set of chanting beads, organised the pilgrimage in India, and encouraged her to follow the course in Vrindavana. After her participation in the introductory course she decided to remain in ISKCON. When she decided to move into the temple, she voluntarily distanced herself from her former circles.

After joining the temple, Caroline started to wear saris and put on *tilaka* marks on her forehead and other parts of the body (belly, chest, shoulders, arms, neck, upper-back, and lower-back) – things that she formerly objected to.²⁰ Yet, it was during her visit to Vrindavana that the adoption of this culture became natural and a strong desire developed in her to enter a monastic life of study and meditation. This development

¹⁹ Bell (1992:107) uses the term 'ritual mastery' to indicate that ritual can only exist in 'specific cultural schemes and strategies for ritualisation'. Bourdieu (1977:87-95, 118-120, 123-124) speaks of 'practical mastery' to indicate 'the systems of classifying schemes that act as instruments for ordering the world that every successfully socialised agent possesses'.

²⁰ Protective marks made with clay collected from the banks of the Yamuna River, and applied on certain parts of the body along with the recitation of names of Vishnu; a practice meant to remind oneself and others that everyone is a servant of Krishna.

shows the importance of social interaction in terms of acculturation into the Vaishnava way of life.

When attending the introductory (*bhakta*) course while living in the Zurich temple, Caroline would repeatedly hear devotional songs (*bhajans*) from a tape recorder. She felt greatly inspired by the songs, especially because the singer's voice evoked a particular mood and longing. Later on, she found out that the singer was Bhakti Prema Ananda Tirtha Swami, the spiritual master of the very devotee who gave her the chanting beads, took her on the pilgrimage tour, and later on became her introductory course teacher. Caroline wanted to meet Bhakti Prema Ananda Tirtha Swami personally, so a meeting was arranged on the Swami's next visit to Zurich. The first question she asked him was: 'How can I accelerate the process to become Krishna conscious?' Bhakti Prema Ananda Tirtha Swami smiled and replied: 'Before you can become Krishna conscious you have to become conscious. This is what I can tell you today, and later I will tell you more about it'. It is not uncommon that graduates from the *bhakta* course aspire to establish a relationship with an ISKCON guru. While firmly fixed in the vows of strictly practising the daily rites and respecting the taboos and restrictions, the novice aspires to undergo the initiation ritual.

Each time Caroline met Bhakti Prema Ananda Tirtha Swami, she would ask questions. Caroline started to hear the swami's lectures and read his book elaborating on the art of chanting the holy names of Krishna. She felt that due to her attraction to Bhakti Prema Ananda Tirtha Swami's personality, and her interest in the topics of his lectures, it was natural for her to approach him as guru and seek to become his disciple. Two years after their first contact, Bhakti Prema Ananda Tirtha Swami accepted Caroline as his disciple, and another two years later, in 2003, she received *harinama* initiation or initiation into the chanting of the holy names of Krishna. In 2005 she received *brahminical* initiation, admittance to the priestly worship of the deity. At the time of her first initiation in 2003, she received the name Krishna Kumari Dasi. This name change is significant as the individual is now officially recognised as a disciple connected with the chain of spiritual masters coming down from Krishna. The name refers to a name of Krishna or a name of a great Vaishnava saint. Caroline received first (*harinama*) and second (*brahminical*) initiation at Goloka Dhama,²¹ one of ISKCON's main temples in Germany, where she arrived right after the introductory *bhakta* course in Zurich. The incorporation rites or initiations took place after Caroline passed the ISKCON exam for first initiation, and received recommendation for initiation from her local authorities. The ceremony of first initiation represents for Caroline the end of her novitiate or transition period, and formal incorporation into ISKCON.

Caroline's journey represents a two-phased pattern of entry. The first phase, from 1998 to 2001, is characterized by a steady growth of regular social interaction with ISKCON adherents and a process of acculturation into a way of life dominated by the daily practice of rites, and the respecting of taboos. The second stage, late 2000 to early 2001, was a period of constant and intense socialisation that started when Caroline went back to Vrindavana to study Vaishnava scriptures – an experience

²¹ This temple is situated in Abentheuer, a village near to Birkenfeld in the county Rhineland-Palatinate in Germany. She moved from the city temple in Zurich to the countryside of Abentheuer because she felt more at home in a village.

involving intensive association with senior ISKCON teachers and the establishing of a relationship with an ISKCON guru.

Dimensions of Ritual Power

Using examples from Caroline's story and other interviewees, I will demonstrate that 'conversion' to ISKCON involves exposure to the power of ritualisation working through five dimensions: (1) the effects of ritual practice on socialisation and vice versa; (2) the role of ritual specialists; (3) ritualisation facilitating the reinterpretation of reality; (4) the forms of misrecognition and blindness resulting from ritual practice; and (5) the influence of ritualisation on the agency of entrants.

The first dimension of ritual power relevant here relates to Bell's point that ritualisation is a means of social control. Her observation is based on the understanding that the effectiveness of formalisation is determined by prescribed norms of behaviour and by the constraints associated with ritual practice (Bell, 1992:106). The constraints influence an individual in his or her choice of social interaction. The extent to which the required ritual milieu is compatible or incompatible with a/n entrant's previous sociocultural environment determines his or her relationship with that environment.

Examining interviewee narratives like those of Caroline, it becomes clear that there is a clear stage of growing alienation from former social circles at the beginning of the entry or *conversion* process. When in 1999 Caroline began to visit the ISKCON temple in Zurich, she gradually started to avoid engagements contrary to, or not belonging to the culture of, Krishna-centred devotion. This resulted in her avoiding all literature – except that related to Chaitanya Vaishnavism – and in avoiding contact with her previous friends and acquaintances. In addition, she started cooking her own food at home. Her mother, ignorant about the meaning and origin of the daughter's new orientation and practice, was shocked and became afraid that she had got affiliated with a dangerous cult. Caroline's friends tried to keep her away from contact with ISKCON, but with little success.

A deeper understanding of Caroline's behaviour requires insight into the dynamics governing ISKCON's daily ritual practice. Ritualisation is a set of strategies specific to the particular culture in which certain activities are set off from others because they are deemed sacred, whereas all others are considered profane. It entails generating schemes of opposition and hierarchy (Bell, 1992:105-106). Based on polarities, such as purity/pollution, body/soul and higher/lower, ritualisation creates a distinction between the sacred (pure/higher) and the profane (polluted/low). It sacralises the activity by means of attributing a transcendental reality to each specific element of practice.

By enabling an individual's continuous absorption in these schemes as a transformed 'reality', ritual gains the power to do what it does. Horizontal schemes of opposition are concerned with polarities between, for example, principles of purity (sacred) and pollution (mundane), and vertical schemes of oppositions distinguish between inferiors and superiors, or neophytes and ritual specialists (Bell, 1992:124-125). Both the acceptance of and absorption in horizontal and vertical schemes of oppositions can produce significant social effects for participants in ritual-centred social organisations

or movements, for such acceptance and absorption can lead to alienation from the outside world, integration in the ritual community, and social advancement and promotion within that community. The results of ritual action based on these schemes of polarities are often attributed to the powers of a divine authority.

By socialising with ISKCON adherents Caroline became gradually acquainted with the concept of 'spiritual food' or *prasadam*, and learns how to prepare lacto-vegetarian food and offer it to the deity. She was informed that *prasadam* is 'karma-free food'. In that way, she became gradually acquainted with the concept of karma and the principle that every action is the cause of a reaction to be received in present or future lives. The *prasadam* experience, associated with the concept of karma, is a matter of 'programmed learning', involving the assimilation of the laws of karma and the principle of making food 'karma-free' through its being ritually offered to Krishna.²² As a result of internalizing the concept of *prasadam* as pure and karma-free food, adherents consider food not offered to the deity as polluted, and, when eaten, is a cause of suffering in this life and/or the next. Thus, Caroline, afraid of her consciousness becoming polluted, avoided eating anything not ritually offered to the deity. The non-sharing of food with her own family members was a consequence of perceived incompatibility with ritual dominated ISKCON environment.

While immersion in horizontal schemes of ritualisation based on principles of purity and pollution may cause alienation from former circles, ritual experiences shared among group members may also increase social solidarity which in turn supports a growing sense of integration. Social interaction also affects an entrant's immersion in ritual activity. It is often a source of empowerment for ritual activity. Interaction between group members may help the individual to internalise the concepts of the belief system supporting the practice, and by sharing positive ritual experience with others, he or she may become inspired to enthusiastically perform the rites. Involvement in ritual is intensified when adherents share beliefs in, and experiences of, the power of ritual. The following experience of Tibor (Czech, aged 52, and an ISKCON devotee for over twenty years) demonstrates this. What attracted Tibor most was his experience of attending a concert of the *Gauranga Bhajan Band*, a group of mainly Serbian ISKCON adherents who, during the early 1990s, performed concerts all over Europe and became famous for that. When Tibor attended such a concert in Prague and experienced the chanting of the Hare Krishna *kirtan* together with more than five hundred people, he wished it would never stop. The experiences shared by Tibor seem to support the idea that ritual is 'a relative straightforward mechanism for social solidarity' (Kertzer, 1988:95). Kertzer notes that ritual has a social function with regard to the inculcating of belief. It is plausible to accept that the engagement in *kirtan*, done by persons who share the belief in the power of the chanting, encourages participants to accept the purifying power of the chanting as a fact. P. Berger (1967:45-51), in this regard, makes an attempt to explain how group experiences influence individual participants to accept the power of rituals. He argues that the relation between the 'plausibility structure' and the 'social world' is dialectical, with each affecting and reinforcing the other.²³ In ISKCON communities, this dialectic is fortified by the

²² This is in keeping with Bell (1992:111), who claims that ritual practice often is a matter of 'programmed learning that involves perception and reproduction of concepts or principles'.

²³ Merquior, Thompson and Bourdieu similarly relate this to ideology, which they view AS a 'strategy of power and legitimation', a process whereby certain practices are depicted to be 'natural' and 'right' (Bell: 1992:191).

tradition's epistemological approach wherein both the ritual experience and scriptural learning are means of receiving 'true knowledge'.

The second dimension of ritual power central to analysing the influence of ritualisation on 'conversion' relates to ritual specialists and their roles. Spiritual leaders, gurus, renunciants, or other types of overseers may function as ritual experts. Ritual specialists usually help novices to embrace the worldviews central to the ritual practice and to internalise them. They exercise authority over ritual practice by setting standards and evaluating the performance of adherents. They also guide neophytes and often decide whether neophytes are ready for initiation. Ritual experts are usually considered to have attained ritual 'purity' (as in the case of ISKCON), or they are examples for others who want to improve their ritual expertise. Their impact on social and hierarchical promotion and gaining access to higher positions of ritual expertise are important factors in furthering incorporation. Ritual specialists are often a source of inspiration for neophytes, and this inspiration empowers neophytes to raise their level of ritual mastery and become a qualified member of the group.

The guru plays a central role in guiding novices to achieve promotion within ISKCON's social hierarchy. According to J. Richardson and M. Stewart (1978:33-34), conversion will always occur when there are positive affective ties with members of the religious group. This may take different forms, varying from a relationship with a congregational group of adherents, with one or more specific individuals, with a guru or senior guide, or any combination of these. Yet without positive affective ties with a guru who orders, guides, and evaluates the disciples' daily ritual practice, individuals cannot climb the rungs of ISKCON's social hierarchy, nor attain permission and eligibility for undergoing the initiation ritual. Bourdieu (1977:41 and 184) declares that those 'who control ritualisation are in command of a particularly powerful form of objectification.' He maintains that this is especially relevant to cultures where there are few or no other institutionalised structures to rival it. This is especially true for an ISKCON guru functioning solely within the boundaries of ISKCON's social and institutional body.

ISKCON's hierarchy is based on group differentiation centred on individuals' level of 'ritual mastery'. Valeri (1985:109-129, 172-88, and 134) claims that hierarchy is intrinsic to ritual and that it often functions as a process of differentiation that establishes social positions. A Brahmin's level of devotional absorption in ritual practice is considered to be more immersing than that of a first initiate or a novice. It is, however, the guru who observes and evaluates the novice or first initiate, and decides whether the disciple has progressed sufficiently to undergo the initiation ritual. The guru guides the disciple in the correct performance of ritual practice, and his or her guidance is believed to be critical to its efficacy. This is in keeping with Bell (1992:134), who concludes that correct performance of the ritual is crucial to the promotion and maintenance of ritual mastery.

Bell (1992:130) notes how the presence of specialists affects ritual practice. The guru in ISKCON is a ritual specialist who commands authority by dint of his or her proficiency in ritual performance. An ISKCON guru, if perceived within the framework of Geertz's (1973:113) theory, is a person who, through ritual practice, has successfully fused the world as lived and the world as seen through the lens of Chaitanya Vaishnava theology. The guru practices Chaitanya Vaishnava ideals within the boundaries of an institutionalised social and hierarchical structure. Gurus can be

compared to engines propelling the novice to a steady level of ritual mastery and instilling in the person the desire to become an initiated member of ISKCON. The guru symbolises the perfection of a person who has internalized ISKCON's worldviews, attained absolute mastery in ritual practice, and is fully committed to serving ISKCON's missions within the limits of the institution. As a result the guru reproduces the devotional environment by perceiving it through 'Krishna consciousness' or seeing the hand of God everywhere, at any time. Establishing a guru-disciple relationship is an indispensable linking factor enabling the practitioner of daily rites to rise to the level of ritual mastery to qualify for undergoing the initiation rites. Positive ties with both individual ISKCON adherents and gurus are of crucial importance for novices desiring to become initiated members of ISKCON. They offer gateways of communication with the newly encountered tradition, and enable increased social interaction.

We see an example of an evolving disciple-guru relationship in the case of Victor. Victor first met Krishna-kumar Das, an ISKCON guru, during a public ISKCON programme in Belgrade. Victor was attracted by Krishna-kumar Das's peaceful and sober demeanour, his deep knowledge and realisation of the philosophy, and his attractive chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra and other Vaishnava songs. His first meeting with Krishna-kumar Das inspired Victor to take up the ritual practice, engage with the beliefs, intensify his social interaction with adherents, commit to the chanting, and respect the prohibitions. His bond of friendship with Krishna-kumar Das also inspired him to approach other senior ISKCON adherents and *sannyasis*. This led Victor to take guidance from Hare Krishna Swami, who in due course of time accepted him as his disciple. Becoming a disciple of an ISKCON guru opens the possibility of receiving initiation after a period of practising the daily rites and observing the taboos for at least one full year without interruption. In addition to the institutional rules dictating eligibility for initiation, and despite the recommendation by local and regional ISKCON authorities, it remains the ISKCON guru who has the final word in deeming the aspiring or first-initiated disciple fit for either *harinama* or Brahmin initiation.

The development of Victor's affective relationship with an ISKCON adherent is representative of the early stages of entry described by the majority of interviewees. Caroline, for instance, had multiple contacts with Vrindavanacandra Das, a *brahmachari* (celibate monk) who organised Caroline's first tourist trip from Switzerland to India, a journey during which – while visiting various ISKCON temples in India – she came in contact with ISKCON's beliefs and practices. It was also Vrindavanacandra Das who gave her chanting beads, who answered many of her questions, who was her teacher during an introductory course, who gave her a *bhajan* tape sung by her future guru, and who introduced her to Bhakti Prema Ananda Swami. After her first meetings with Bhakti Prema Ananda Swami, Caroline developed a close bond with him, which led her to accept the swami as her guru and become his disciple. Developing bonds of affection with senior adherents, especially with an ISKCON guru, is a common feature in the journey taken by most novices.

The third dimension of ritual power is that ritualisation facilitates the interpretation of reality. This is best illustrated by explaining Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'. Bourdieu (1977, 1992, 1997) looks at the transformative powers of ritual. His approach to ritual, labeled as 'practice theory', is concerned with the relationship between ritual and the cultural context in which people live and conduct their lives. He looks at ritual in relation to the ability to reproduce the practitioner's social cultural environment into an order in

which the tradition's views are experienced as reality. According to Bourdieu, this transformed sense of reality is a result of *habitus*, an instance of practice embedded in a set of structured dispositions, proclivities crucial to reinterpretation of reality. This *instance of practice* in the context of groups rooted in ritual may refer to the practice of the everyday rites, and the 'structured dispositions' to the tradition's worldview, values, moral principles, and beliefs. Bourdieu's thesis is that 'ritual mastery' cannot be isolated from the support it derives from a set of structured (cultural) dispositions. Such structured dispositions are often internalised through the adoption of worldview, ethos, traditional values, and moral principles. *Habitus* refers to an action that is based on accepting internalised dispositions as reality. Bourdieu (1977:87-95, 118-200, 124) maintains that in the end absorption in such a projected form of reality leads to the formation of a 'ritualised body'. Such a 'ritualised body' is a body invested with a 'sense of ritual', which exists as 'an implicit variety of schemes whose deployment works to produce socio-cultural situations that the ritualised body can dominate in some way.' Bourdieu (1977:163) claims that the process of ritualising bodies is a strategy of 'integration through division' and as such is a means for hierarchisation, or, within the context of ISKCON, a set of successive social promotions, moving the entrant from the status of novice to that of Brahmin. Bourdieu's theory is helpful in analysing the interrelation between the ritual practice and its environment.

The series of events emerging from Caroline's story help to clarify how a set of dispositions are generated, creating an environment for the 'habitus' to reinterpret an individual's sense of reality. Her decision to live in the temple led her to engage in ritual temple worship and to interact more closely with residents. These experiences further led her to change her Western style of clothing for saris and to decorate her forehead with Vaishnava *tilaka*²⁴. Her social interaction with temple residents not only had a profound effect on Caroline's cultural dispositions, but also changed her worldviews. Her changed conceptions of life were reinforced through her training and her completion of ISKCON's educational courses. In addition, the guidance of her ISKCON guru increased her enthusiasm to follow the Chaitanya Vaishnava moral codes that sustain the restrictions and taboos that are considered a prerequisite for ritual efficacy. All these events assisted in creating a set of structured dispositions, which through ritual practice and social interaction with ISKCON adherents, led Caroline to experience the tradition's worldviews as a reality. This corroborates Bell's (1992:140) conclusion that 'ritual mastery' is 'an internalisation of schemes with which agents are capable of reinterpreting reality in such a way as to afford perceptions and experiences of a redemptive hegemonic order.'

The fourth dimension of ritual power has to do with forms of misrecognition and blindness associated with ritual practice. Ascertaining forms of misrecognition associated with ritual practice helps to uncover the dynamics of ritual control and their impact on individuals entering the organisation. Ritualisation results in participants internalising the principles of the environment being delineated. In ISKCON's case, these principles relate to the dispositions or theological, philosophical, moral, and ethical considerations that support rules of sets of oppositions concerning purity and pollution. They form what is hereafter referred to as a 'structured and structuring

²⁴ Protective marks made with clay collected from the banks of the Yamuna River, and applied on certain parts of the body along with the recitation of names of Vishnu; a practice meant to remind oneself and others that everyone is a servant of Krishna.

environment'. The rule-governed character of daily ritual practice in ISKCON is embedded in schemes of ritualisation that use polarities of purity and pollution, set the individual apart from the non-ISKCON world, and deploy oppositions of superior and inferior to hierarchise between neophytes and advanced practitioners. By adopting these strategies and through rules of differentiation, ISKCON entrants internalise values, reinterpret reality and become 'ritualised bodies'.

The internalisation methods, Bell (1992:99) argues, involve a circular process that tends to be misrecognized. Within the ISKCON framework this circular process relates to the constant projection of ritual schemes on oneself and by one individual on another. This implies that devotional practices, such as chanting and *prasadam* rituals, are performed within a reality structured by the above-mentioned principles and considerations. Therefore, there is first the formation of an ethical, moral and ritual environment that empowers the ritual practice to impress the schemes of ritualisation upon participants.²⁵ The influence of these schemes induces adherents to perceive the structured environment as reality. Because of this circular process, the ritual practitioner deeply identifies him- or herself with the principles of that structured environment. This identification often deepens to such an extent that individuals disconnect this structured reality from the elements that initially formed the structuring environment.

Practitioners internalise different principles of the environment through varying schemes. These schemes may be based on (any combination of) ideological concepts, projected values, social and hierarchical elements, and conversion strategies. By 'ideological schemes', especially in reference to the following examples, I mean schemes that project the principles of Chaitanya Vaishnava philosophy and its practical theology as explained by Bhaktivedanta in ISKCON's books. Ideology-based schemes are often related to concepts, such as karma, rebirth, and liberation. They form basic principles sustaining the construction of Chaitanya Vaishnava views. It is within the scope of these views that the chanting and *prasadam* rites are practised and internalised. The following excerpts show how interviewees project ideology-based schemes:

The law of karma and the theological understandings surrounding the transmigration of the soul through the cycle of birth and death gave me a broader understanding of the meaning of spiritual life. Additionally, it gave me also a deeper understanding of the issues concerned with ethics and morality. That image of reality became supported by personal experiences of a 'spiritual nature' perceived while chanting *Hare Krishna*. The *bhakti* concept is the essential element of every religion. There are no religions or faiths, which are devoid of *bhakti*. Chaitanya Vaishnava philosophy deals exactly with the essence of all religions and therefore it is universally applicable. By chanting *Hare Krsna* and practicing *bhakti*, devotional service, I am in contact with spirituality of the first grade. I felt all of them are included in the simple forms of *bhakti-yoga* (Bartek).

²⁵ Ritualisation produces a ritualised person through the interaction of the body (or person) with a structured and structuring environment. In Bourdieu's (1977:89) words: 'It is the dialectal relationship between the body and a space structured according to mythico-ritual oppositions that one finds the form par excellence of the structural apprenticeship which leads to the embodying of the structures of the world, that is, the appropriating by the world of a body thus enable to appropriate the world'.

I became convinced by the law of karma; in particular the ideas that your thoughts at the time of death will determine your future. As such you cannot do anything you want and have a good result in the next life. If you have the mentality of a dog, you will be a dog in the next life. So I try to do these activities which will not degrade me. All opportunities are there. Both elevation and degradation are there for human beings. The simple fact that people are unequal at birth, and that some are rich and others are poor and live in bad conditions is reconciled by the doctrine of rebirth. Reincarnation helped me to understand this injustice. People in their former birth have done bad activities and now reap the consequences and suffer. From that time I accepted reincarnation (Rafael).

I am convinced that ISKCON's Chaitanya Vaishnava philosophy and practice are universally applicable; not only for humans, but for other species as well. It has been proven in Vaishnava history that even animals benefited from devotional service. The soul's spiritual advancement is not restricted by any type of body. Spiritual advancement, which is a product of strict observance of Vaishnava philosophy, is rather a matter of consciousness. How ironic it is that the vast majority of humans are disqualified for reaping benefits of Vaishnava philosophy simply because their consciousness is less than animalistic (Victor).

Bartek's idea that '*bhakti* is the essential element of every religion' and is 'universally applicable' borrows directly from Bhaktivedanta's teachings, e.g. as reflected in Bhaktivedanta words (2012b): 'Every religion teaches how to love God more or less. That is the only aim' (Lecture in London, August 27, 1971). And Bhaktivedanta (2012a): 'No one can be barred from Krishna consciousness because it is universal'. (*Bhagavad-gita*, commentary on verse 9.26.) The analogy of the dog, used by Rafael, is also derived from Bhaktivedanta (2012a): 'At the time of death, the consciousness he has created will carry him on to the next type of body. If he has made his consciousness like that of a cat or dog, he is sure to change to a cat's or dog's body' (*Bhagavad Gita*, commentary on verse 15.8.). Victor's criticism declaring that the majority of humans have an animalistic consciousness comes straight from Bhaktivedanta's (2012d) commentaries: 'The specific utterance of *Srimad Bhagavatam* in regard to 'other animals' means that persons who are simply engaged in planning a better type of animal life consisting of eating, breathing and mating are also animals in the shape of human beings' (Commentary on *Bhagavata Purana* 2.3.18).

Directly or indirectly, in these excerpts from their interviews, Bartek, Rafael and Victor project the teachings of Bhaktivedanta onto their own realities. However, they do not refer to Bhaktivedanta as the source of their ideas. Rather, they present Bhaktivedanta's teachings as their own vision and realisation. This occurs because of their constant projection of the ideology-based structured dispositions through ritual practice. By repeatedly projecting mainly ideology-based schemes, adherents construct an environment in which their experience is transformed into what they believe is the 'really real'. Because of that absorption, adherents identify with the projected environment to such an extent that they see the knowledge received from Bhaktivedanta as a universal reality. Indeed, interviewees do not consider it necessary to refer to Bhaktivedanta, or ISKCON's particular historical and social background, as the source of their experience and perception of reality. This apparent blindness to ideological source-recognition is true with respect to almost all the interviewees.

The fifth and last dimension of ritual power, that is, the influence of ritualisation on the agency of entrants, concerns the relationship between ritual practice and the dynamics of agency. Examining the effects of ritual practice on agency first of all requires identifying the prevailing forms of passivity and/or active agency that emerge from a study of the entry process in a particular organisation. Scanning fieldwork results through the stages of extant conversion models is often helpful to determine elements of agency. Active agency usually relates to forms of seekership, commitment, and voluntary engagement in social interaction. Passivity can result from submission to social pressure or blindly following the organisation's norms. Once identified, it is important to understand how these elements of agency and/or passivity are linked with ritual practice. A search for meaning, for instance, may give rise to a quest for understanding the meaning of the ritual or may give rise to questions about the experience of ritual action. The choice of social interaction may be controlled by principles governing the schemes of ritualisation. Commitment to ritual practice may result from having received satisfactory answers to questions emerging from a search for meaning, or growing ritual expertise may inspire new entrants to try and qualify for an initiation ritual. It is important to examine the extent to which daily ritual practice governs the development of seekership, commitment, choice of social contacts, etc., and the extent to which it facilitates or hinders the active agency of entrants.

The following is an example of how commitment to ritual practice results from a search of the meaning and how a search for meaning emerges from ritual experience. Tony (Finish, aged 49) joined ISKCON Helsinki in 1987 and throughout his entire journey, a steady search for meaning continuously unfolded. Tony contacted ISKCON adherents in Helsinki and went back and forth to the temple with questions. This went on for almost a year. It was a period of learning through regular social interaction, an experience confirming Shinn's observation (1989:130) that the process that provides answers to questions feeds into a renewed and constant search for meaning. Tony gradually developed the desire to associate with people living the philosophy.

When Tony moved into the ISKCON Helsinki temple, he entered a period of intense social interaction with ISKCON adherents, a period that nurtured his growing sense of meaning. When he became acquainted with the law of karma, Tony believed he had found an accurate explanation for the cause of the pleasure and suffering of individuals in this world. He therefore wanted to participate in the spiritual practices, which are understood to be karma-free, and to enable the elimination of all one's past karma. In this way, he became involved in the ritual practice and gradually accepted the principles that sustain the sets of oppositions regarding purity and pollution. The combination of *accepting* these principles and *acting* accordingly changed Tony's views on reality. As a result he integrated the concepts of karma, reincarnation, etc., into his perception of the real world. Tony said:

The law of karma obviously explains the cause for suffering. The ultimate reason is that we suffer because of our previous actions. We come into a room, and what we will do in the room is up to us. Yet what we can do in a certain situation is due to our previous karma.

This change in worldview is indicative of the attainment of a deeper level of incorporation. Serving as a *brahmacari* or monk, strictly adhering to the regulative

principles and the daily practice of chanting, Tony engaged in the missionary activity of book distribution. But despite his strict daily ritual practice and engagement, Tony felt the need for further inquiry. However, the nature of his search for meaning altered significantly. Due to his absorption in the ritual schemes, he experienced improved mental control. Moreover, he developed an increased level of endurance in coping with distress. Hence, he felt the need to further inquire into the cause of his increased mind-control, endurance and determination. He also wanted to better understand how he had become more detached and aloof from worldly activities, and how his feelings of detachment would advance further. Of course, he was aware that these qualities had something to do with his steady ritual practice. Tony expressed his experience as follows:

In the beginning I was reading and going back and forth with questions. However, later on, through the chanting and following the 'regulative principles', I became more sober and detached.

It was at that time that Tony met Siddhartha Swami, who eventually accepted him as his disciple. From his guru Tony received further insights into the relationship between the principles explained in Chaitanya Vaishnava theology and his own experiences. Yet his thirst for meaning never became fully satiated. His journey has been characterized by a persistent inquisitiveness, which led him through two levels of seekership. In the first, he sought the meaning of the ritual practice; in the second, he sought an explanation for what he experienced as an improvement in his mental capabilities resulting from his spiritual practice.

Conclusions

This framework of analysis of the power of ritualisation enables the identification of major elements of daily ritual practice, which may influence entry processes and 'conversion'. The framework proposed here takes into consideration the ways in which ritualisation facilitates the process of incorporation by strategically internalising values, worldviews, moral principles, ethics and beliefs, and how ritual practice achieves its ends. Insights into how ritualisation facilitates incorporation, is helpful in gaining an understanding of the powers of ritual practice and its role in the entry process. Such an understanding, in turn, facilitates the construction of a model of entry applicable to the particular circumstances of the case study.

Entry into ISKCON is an ongoing, gradual process of transformation — a process rather different from Paul's experience on the road of Damascus. Without an in-depth study of the dynamics associated with the dimensions of power that govern the everyday ritual practice, the correlation between ritual and conversion remains concealed. Whereas the Christian viewpoint focuses on religious experience and conversion, entry into Hindu traditions rooted in daily rituals requires an understanding of the relationship between ritual practice and the conversion process.

Discussions of the study of ritual in relation to theories of conversion are important. Rather than proposing a standard model, conversion theories could offer guidelines for creating a model that accurately accounts for the specifics of ritual action inherent in every religious organisation which consider ritual a crucial practice. These themes,

inevitably, are of immediate relevance to other religious movements rooted in the performance of everyday rituals. The practice of daily rituals as performed by ISKCON adherents is not unique. There are numerous examples of other traditions whose meditation rites, for instance, are very similar to the daily chanting ritual practised by ISKCON adherents. Examples are the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement inaugurated in 1958 by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi as the Spiritual Regeneration Movement and the Soka Gakkai is a branch of Nichiren Buddhism (Japan) with a significant international outreach.

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