

Conversion, Personal Identity, Life History

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Abstract: In this study, the life histories of two basic groups, Krishna monks and Krishna followers were examined. During the analysis, we discovered that the different situation of the two groups has essential influence on the process and development of conversion. We found that the definition of conversion proposed by Snow and Machalek may be considered an ideal type, as its properties are present in the exact form described by the authors primarily in the case of monks. In the case of those more loosely connected to the Hare Krishna Movement, only a “minimal programme” of the new mentality is present. In their case, the properties of conversion, i.e. drastic biographical reconstruction, adoption of the new pattern of thinking and thorough embracement of the convert role, were only partially attained. In what the fourth property – iconic language – is concerned, no relevant example was found in the scholarly literature about those loosely connected to the Movement. Thus, even the members of a new religious movement with such rigorous and fundamental theology as the ISKCON should not be treated as a homogeneous group.

Keywords: *Hare Krishna Movement; conversion; life history; levels of personality; personal identity.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *Mișcarea Hare Krishna; convertire; istoria vieții; niveluri ale personalității; identitate personală.*

Introduction

In the West, the Hare Krishna Movement first appeared at the end of the 1960s, in America. From there, it spread to Europe, and finally, it arrived to Central and Eastern Europe. The ISKCON¹, which is the society propagating the fundamentalist theology of Krishna consciousness, has also been present in Hungary, from the early 1990s. In the beginning, public opinion used to accuse the Movement of “brainwashing”, but today, due to our broadening understanding and to the internal reforms of the ISKCON itself, the case of the Movement’s followers is regarded less harshly, it is accepted as a change of identity. According to experts, the Krishna Movement has made important compromises in order to better adapt to the

Western civilization, for example by “permitting” family life and by improving women’s situation within the Movement (Bryant and Ekstrand, 2004; Barker, 2008; Rockford, 2007; Rochford, 2009).

Conversion is one of the classic subjects of the sociology of religion, but identity researchers are also interested in it. While the sociology of religion mainly seeks the social and personal causes, motivations and consequences of conversion, one of the most important questions for identity analysts explores what changes in a personality after conversion and in what way.

The aim of this study is to contribute to the general understanding of the changes determined by conversion within the followers of the Hare Krishna Movement. From the outside, it can be observed that members of the Movement pass through countless trans-

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formations in the course of their conversion, in order to achieve their most important goal, i.e. the eternal unchangeability, the Krishna consciousness. However, we think that these changes do not affect every Krishna consciousness follower to the same degree.

In this study, we attempt to reveal the similarities and differences between Krishna monks and Krishna followers, during their conversion.

The analysis is primarily based on the theory developed by David A. Snow and Richard Machalek. They regard conversion as a societal phenomenon characterised by four properties: 1) biographical reconstruction; 2) adoption of a master attribution scheme; 3) suspension of analogical reasoning; and 4) embracement of the convert role. Using the life history as analysis method, the appearance of these four aspects in the lives of the inner core of the Krishna Movement (the monks) and of those more loosely connected to the Movement (Krishna followers) was examined.

Theoretical interpretations of conversion

The mentality of the Krishna Movement is fundamentally different from the western one. In brief, on one hand, western religions perceive time and space linearly, as opposed to the cyclic views accepted in India. On the second hand, in the West, a person traditionally has one life on earth and one in the after-life, after death; depending on their earthly life, one spends their eternal life either in heaven or in hell. In the Indian perspective (Buddhism, Hinduism), on the contrary, several earthly lives are attached to a single person, called reincarnations. Without going into further detail, the radical difference between the two interpretations of the world is obvious.

Religious conversion itself involves a significant change of mentality (Snow and Machalek, 1983), and it is even more pronounced when a member of the western civilization converts to an eastern religion, such as the Hare Krishna Movement.

According to Lewis Rambo, conversion is a complex concept, in which people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations and experiences all transform (Rambo, 1993, 158). To interpret conversion, the author elaborated a descriptive model, differentiating between several types of conversion. According to this system, conversion may mean (1.) a change of tradition (e.g. when someone converts from the Islam to Christianity), (2.) a change of institution (from Baptist to Catholic), (3.) a variation of intensity (becoming more devoted to the same religion), or (4.) joining a new religious movement (Paloutzian et al., 1999, 1052). As opposed to previous conversion research, Rambo also examined the “apostatic” phase of conversion, in which a person leaves their religious environment after a while (Rambo, 1993, 158; Gooren, 2007, 344-345).

Traditionally, the Hare Krishna Movement or ISKCON is regarded a new religious movement in sociology. In the following, conversions to this Movement are discussed.

German psychologists of religion, Kraus and Eckert, conducted research using personality tests (Kraus, 1999). Besides other new religious movements, they also conducted research among the members of the Hare Krishna Movement. Their results support the assumption that the members of the Movement live in a hierarchical structure with a charismatic leader and that they comply with strict rules and expectations about lifestyle. The authors further presumed that many of the members of the Hare Krishna Movement are burdened by self-esteem problems. For them, the idealization of the religious leader and the overemphasizing of certain values is a rewarding approach to

life. Members' self-esteem is enhanced by their relationship with the idealized religious leader and this gives them immunity against disappointments. In their case, overemphasizing certain values suppresses aggressive impulses, such as the moral condemnation of others. Another result of this research showed that the Krishna Movement helps to stabilize the self-image of its members. The authors found that the longer the person's membership was, the steadier their self-image became (Kraus, 1999, 276).

The analysis of the consequences of conversion within the hereby study is mainly based on the theory of Snow and Machalek, thus, it is necessary to discuss its principles in more detail.

One of the typical consequences of conversion is that the convert radically re-interprets their **life history** (Snow and Machalek, 1983, 269). The convert views their past in a new light, the events become fundamentally re-interpreted. The convert regards past events as if they had been mistakes at the time. This, however, involves two aspects: on the one hand, re-interpreting the past based on the experiences of the present, and on the other hand, re-interpreting it based on the "truth" or not. The first process is characteristic to every life history, as all of us recall the past from the perspective of the present. This means that we re-interpret former events of our lives in the light of our new experiences.

The effect of conversion, however, is manifested more vigorously. According to the authors, the convert becomes the possessor of the "truth", and so their previous life undergoes a judgemental process. This is why it may happen that, after conversion, people regard their past as pointless or an error.

The other formal characteristic of conversion is the **adoption of a master attribution scheme**. Every person needs to understand the surrounding world, the functioning of which depends on either internal

or external causes. Internal attribution means that the actor is responsible for the events, while external attribution means the opposite, that the others are responsible for the events – the surroundings, nature, society –, and not the individual. After conversion, the individual adopts the attribution scheme of the new interpretative framework. At this point, phenomena which previously used to be considered inexplicable or had had several explanations, are now explained by one comprehensive scheme considered to be true. The convert traces the roots of its problems back to internal causes, mainly, in accordance with the new pattern of thinking.

The third formal property of conversion is the **suspension of analogical reasoning**. In everyday life, we learn about unknown things by using the logic of comparison. For this, we employ analogous metaphors, such as "a pear is a fruit like an apple, only slimmer" or "you fly like a bird". The theory sustaining that things resemble each other, that they are not unique, and we do not have to deal with irreproducible phenomena, supports statements like this. As opposed to analogous metaphors, iconic metaphors concern things which are intrinsically unique and extraordinary. For example, "God is love". Statements like this do not follow the logic of comparison, but that of extraordinariness. No-one can precisely tell what God is like, for no-one has ever seen Him. This is why this type of metaphor is called iconic. The convert also uses iconic metaphors, feeling to have met something that had formerly been hidden from them. Their new experience cannot be compared to anything else.

The fourth formal property is the **embodiment of a master role**. After conversion, the individual strives to display their new Movement, their new mentality to others, in each of his/her roles. The disciples want to represent the religious community at all times, with all their deeds.

The authors describe the changes following conversion using the aspects described

above. The focal point of this paper revolves around the manifestation of these traits among the members of the Hare Krishna Movement.

Participants to the research

This study processes the data extracted from the life interviews of 17 followers of the Krishna consciousness. The interviews were recorded in the summer of 2006 in a Hungarian town, their average duration was 90-120 minutes. Each respondent was asked about the antecedents of their religious conversion, its process, and the changes in its awakening.

When selecting the interviewees, age was the most important criterion. We strived to find the most appropriate age group for the purposes of the study. Since the life history method was employed, we needed to talk to the older devotees, who had a more comprehensive overlook and more experience in all that they had gone through. After meeting the respondents, it soon became clear that the convert moving into the community's temple following their conversion is one of the indicators of the intensity of their devotion. The ones living in the temple are called monks, or bhaktas in the Movement, before or after initiation.

From the interviewees, 14 persons were "Krishna monks", while 3 persons were "merely" "Krishna followers". The latter did not move into the temple house of the community, but joined the Krishna Movement while continuing with their civil lives. We named this group "civils" or "Krishna followers".

The age distribution of the participants was as follows: 14 persons were between 25 and 38, and 3 between 50 and 60. Eleven men and six women were interviewed.

It is important to note that, as this is a life history research, which is a qualitative

method, the question of representativeness is irrelevant; conclusions may be drawn from patterns revealed from the stories.

Conversion histories of "Krishna monks"

The bhaktas, i.e. 14 of the respondents, lived in one of the temples of the Movement. 13 of them belonged to the 30-40 age group; only one of them was 55. The majority had become Krishna followers about ten years before, having joined the Movement when it first appeared in Hungary after the transition to democracy. This means that most of the bhaktas were converted at about the end of their adolescence, or at the beginning of their adulthood. It is well-known that personal identity also is consolidated at this age.

The bhakta's life is entirely devoted to the ideals and purposes of the Movement, 24 hours a day. This implies that the horizon of the interviewees' life histories was the theology of Krishna consciousness. This new universe of discourse was typically present in every case when the bhaktas talked about their past.

1. **Iconic metaphor:** the monks mentioned *intellectual hunger* as the motivator of conversion, which – in retrospect – could not have been satisfied by anything but the Krishna consciousness.

This circumstance is especially remarkable in the case of one of the monks who joined the Movement at the very early age of 16.

"I like to know why things happen, what the meaning of life is. I got very good answers in the Krishna consciousness. This was a philosophy that had answers to all of my questions..." And later: "Besides, I have seen people, they usually don't have a palpable purpose in life for which they do things. They only achieve something temporary. For me, this was not enough. I

needed an eternal purpose, which is a sincere purpose. Here, I got this" (Man, age 35, Krishna monk).

"I had always been searching for something different. It is good that you have a profession, that you want to live in a family etc. But, for me, this had always felt incomplete, something was still missing from my life. I didn't know what that missing thing was. I felt that I had some purpose in my life that I would like to achieve, but I never knew exactly what it was..." (Man, age 33, Krishna monk).

"Christianity was not attractive. It was as if I wasn't going to church honestly and willingly. This was for reasons that I got to realize later, such as people not taking it seriously, and that I could not find this pureness, which I can experience here. I couldn't see the sincerity, which I also experience here..." (Man, age 36, Krishna monk).

"When I was in high school, I felt that the Bible's teaching doesn't provide a complete knowledge, that I don't get the whole picture. I felt this back then, too, and then through the years it indeed proved to be the case that such kind of religiousness is not real, not pure." (Man, age 60, Krishna monk).

Iconic language is present in every one of the excerpts above. Concepts such as the "eternal, sincere purpose", "pure and sincere religiousness", and "complete knowledge" were not elaborated, as the interviewees regarded their meaning self-evident. After their conversion, these concepts were filled with new meaning for them. They used them as counterpoints when comparing their former and new lives.

According to Snow and Machalek, this is typical to the "language" of the convert. The convert talks using *iconic metaphors*, as they consider the meanings they want to express as incomparable to anything else. And then again, the unique, the irreproducible needs no explanation.

2. Destiny and personal decision: The bhaktas described their way to the conversion as an *intellectual search*, in which they pictured themselves as getting closer and closer to the Krishna consciousness gradually, step by step. The structure of their life history was based on the description of their way to the Krishna consciousness. According to their biography, they had developed an interest for esotery – apart from fortune-telling and séances, as well as yoga and the mentality behind it – at a very early age. They bought or received books, which they read, while they sought the company of people with whom they could talk about the questions that concerned them. They participated in several events, and it was not hard for them to accept the four rules of the Krishna consciousness: vegetarianism, abstinence from drugs and intoxicants, sexuality allowed only in marriage for the purpose of procreation and regular prayer life. Many of them found their way to the Krishna Movement through reiki². It was the climax of their narrative when, at one point in their "search", they talked about having arrived at a Krishna event, where *"they felt they received genuine answers to everything."*

In their conversion narratives, the interviewees claimed that they became acquainted with the Krishna Movement through various personal efforts. So, their conversion is partly an outcome of their own efforts, as they had been continuously searching for the "true" path. The prevalent values from their surroundings were not "enough" for them, that is why they sought something "different".

Having found the Krishna consciousness, the acquisition of the knowledge that the Krishna theology has to offer also depended on their personal perseverance. They regarded their conversion predestined and a consequence of their personal decision, at the same time.

3. Adopting the new pattern of thinking, internal attribution: The monks, who had experienced some kind of *trauma or crisis* before their conversion or even due to the conversion itself, have *processed it afterwards*. According to the teaching of the Krishna consciousness, everyone's earthly life is determined by their karma. If someone had committed some kind of sin in the past, its consequence entails suffering in their next lives. Based on these, it is easily comprehensible why bhaktas do not lament about their past.

"My mother does not want to stay in touch with me. There's nothing I can do about it. I know about her, inquire about her, but she never inquires about me. This is my karma. This is very unpleasant. This is the situation." (Woman, age 38, Krishna monk).

"When I got divorced, it was a trauma. For me, fortunately, it was not as bad as for most people. I had been married for 23 years. Now I know that it had to happen this way. This was karma, too. That I chose her, that those were our children, and how it all worked out. When you look back now, at 50-60, it all adds up beautifully. I had to change at 50." (Man, age 55, Krishna monk).

"When I lost my job, I sat for some time and I was astonished, wondering why was I the one to whom all this had happened. There are times when one's life is harder. Not for everyone, but for some, their karma is like that. He/she gets hardships in his life: illness, a bad body. At that time, I was still ignorant. I'd lost everything I had until then. My job, my life, what we believe to be the meaning of our lives, to support ourselves." (Woman, age 35, Krishna monk).

The bhaktas, after having turned their backs on their former lives and moving into the temple house, gradually mastered the new mindset, as a personal way of thinking and a lifestyle. Parallel to this, they began

to regard the events of their pre-conversion lives according to the new mentality, thus, they interpreted things that had previously happened to them on the basis of the new mentality's logic and teaching. Internal attribution can obviously be discovered in their interpretation of traumas, in the way they ascribe their lives' sufferings to karma.

4. Embracement of the convert role: The monks' life is entirely dedicated to the Movement, 24 hours a day: their clothes, hairstyle, eating habits, daily routine, and marital life – these all follow the Vedic culture. The purpose of their work is to improve themselves and to convert others. Recruiting new members involves distributing books and food on the street and talking to passersby. They preach and continuously prepare for the speeches. This life choice means playing the roles expected by the Krishna consciousness continuously throughout the day.

"I ran a (Krishna) centre which was camouflaged as a vegetarian food bar. Then I began to play music again. I began to think how nice it would be if we could convey the Krishna consciousness in a way that's not alarming. If we can play music, how about conveying the consciousness in a rebellious mood. We write lyrics that transmit something, but are also needed in the rock industry. Krishna followers will listen to them as well, so it has to comply with the philosophy, too..." (Man, age 35, Krishna monk, musician).

According to the text, it is indisputable that these musicians represent the Movement even in their work. Role representation, which is prescribed by the Movement to its followers, is continuous in their case, too.

From the analyses of the bhaktas' life histories, we observed that the typical characteristics of conversion identified by the scholarly literature were present in their texts. The entire life history, past and present, and even predictions for future plans

have been placed in the framework of the new pattern of thinking. Consequently, these life histories appear to be schematic; in them, the past is only relevant as far as it supports the perception of the present.

The question which arises is whether or not the same can be said about those “Krishna followers” who, because of their way of life, are more loosely connected to the Movement.

Conversion narratives of “Krishna followers”

We called the interviewees who did not become bhaktas, but practiced the Krishna consciousness while having a civil life, “Krishna followers”. In the research, the life of three such persons was examined. Two of them belonged to the elderly group, aged 53 and 55, while the third person was 35 at the time of the interview.

While analysing the life histories of this group, which may also be called “civils”, various dissimilarities were identified in comparison with the bhaktas’ life histories. For example, in the case of the “Krishna followers”, iconic language did not appear, and obviously, their assuming the role of Krishna follower cannot be regarded as thorough, either.

Another point of interest is that, in their case, the conversion cannot be regarded as such a profound break which makes them re-interpret all of their life events according to the new mentality. Instead, there is more continuity between their pre- and post-conversion lives than in the case of the monks.

1. A sense of continuity in the life history: while the two older interviewees gave a detailed description of all the sufferings in their lives, the younger “Krishna follower” represented a seemingly successful life. However, in their narratives, the conversion did not typically divide their present life from every event from their pasts.

“We regularly visited the grandparents, the family met up, the family relationships are very good to this day. Before and after Krishna consciousness. Perhaps my frame of reference is somewhat different, but I am the same person, a member of the family...” “Since I have always lived in Pest and I got married, I have a little more to do. Now I visit my parents in the country side every two or three months, but they come to visit too...” (Man, age 35, Krishna follower).

“My sense of inferiority gradually began to diminish. Since then, a huge change occurred in my life. – What was it that caused it? Reiki. It has a way with people, changing identities. It has a positive influence.” (Man, age 55, Krishna follower).

“There is no such thing as chance. This good priest was sent to us by God. (A Catholic priest, they visited him to prepare for marriage.) I always feel the love of God, no matter the religion...”

It is remarkable that life events that had happened before the conversion, such as family relationships and friendships, or the beneficial influence of reiki, or even the positive opinion formed about a Catholic priest have not drastically changed after the conversion. These flashbacks have not been deleted from their memories, neither have they been re-written in a way that they become valueless after the conversion.

2. Adopting the new pattern of thinking, internal attribution: the two older Krishna followers recalled difficult childhoods, talking mostly about suffering. *“I’ve never had friends”, “they would always only laugh at me”*. The mother would *“perpetually endure”*, and the religion teacher from school would always beat him. *“It was always me that got beaten, I hated it.”* Being mocked at because of him being skinny and wearing glasses only aggravated the situation. In addition, a disease of the leg occurred, which no-

one was able to cure, and the interviewee's state deteriorated during adolescence. In brief, "I've always had an awful sense of inferiority". "I was able to conclude that I've probably had this illness (paralysis of the leg) from my previous life." (Man, age 55, Krishna follower).

The most serious problem of the other interviewee's life can also be traced back to childhood:

"I was a very good child. Whatever they said was always alright with me. This caused a lot of problems later, because I didn't dare say no..." "I suffered an awful lot at the kindergarden. The principal hated me badly. She tortured me. She did everything you can imagine." (Woman, age 53, Krishna follower).

After recounting the hardships and sorrows of their lives in detail, they concluded that all the suffering became meaningful within the Krishna consciousness, for them too. When experiencing difficulties, they think of karma, and, afterwards, their life becomes more relaxed.

"I had spent twenty years at the nursery with Krishna consciousness. It was a bit easier at that time. At first, I didn't dare to say no. She took out all of her vengeance on me. But I believe that it is karma. I had to suffer from all this." (Woman, age 53, Krishna follower).

In the above excerpts, the new mindset has appeared as an interpretative factor, apart from the fact that the interviewees have not reduced, but rather exaggerated their sufferings. In their case, the past had not vanished, it still existed in their lives with all its difficulties, parallel to the present, which has brought them tranquillity, as they had emphasized.

3. Partial role fulfilment:

"What does living in Krishna consciousness imply? I became calmer. I look forward to the moment when I can go to

the temple. I get there rarely, maybe two or three times a week. I try to help, when it was renovated, I spent all of my spare time there." (Man, age 55, Krishna follower).

"Staying at the kindergarden as a Krishna follower took so much of my energy that it destroyed me. They (the colleagues) changed after a while. By the time I had learned reiki and sometimes spoke about karma. It was so hard for me there, not only because the headmaster hated me, but also because they were all very different." (Woman, age 53, Krishna follower).

"I started to practise the Krishna consciousness. I became a vegetarian, I didn't drink, I didn't smoke, I had no girlfriend. I began chanting mantras and meditating..." (Man, age 35, Krishna follower, biology teacher).

The life of "Krishna followers" also changed after their conversion, but these changes were not considered complete even by the interviewees. In civil life, immersion in the Krishna consciousness was a longer process and the changes were less pronounced. According to the texts, "becoming more relaxed", living by the four rules, or praying regularly also involved changes in mentality. However, in their case, a thorough embracement of the Movement's requirements lacks in favour of a partial role acceptance.

Summary

In this study, the life histories of two small groups, one of Krishna monks and one of Krishna followers were examined. From the analysis, it could be concluded that the situations that occurred in the lives of the members of the two groups highly affect the consequences of the conversion.

We found that the classical properties of conversion, as shown by Snow and Machalek, are more likely an ideal type,

as, the exact form described by the authors emerges only in the case of monks. In the case of those more loosely connected to the Movement, the “minimal programme” of the new mentality is present; thus, the properties of conversion, namely drastic biographical reconstruction, adoption of the new mindset, and thorough embracement of the con-

vert role were only partially attained. The fourth property – iconic language –, was not reflected in the texts of those who were only loosely connected to the Movement. In conclusion, even the members of a new religious movements with such rigorous and fundamental theology as the ISKCON, should not be treated as a homogeneous unit.

Notes

¹ ISKCON: International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

² “Reiki” meaning: universal life energy.

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