

Conversion and Ritualisation: an Analysis of How Westerners Enter the
International Society for Krishna Consciousness and Assimilate its Values and
Practices

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Abstract

The central aim of my thesis is to examine 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. The central argument of my research is that extant models of conversion do not do justice to the process by which individuals enter ISKCON and assimilate its values, beliefs, and practices. This thesis thus critically examines conversion models/theories and seeks to refine our understanding of conversion, especially in relation to groups in which everyday ritual practice plays a central role. My research is based on the analysis of in-depth interviews with ISKCON entrants and engagement with theories on ritual and literature on conversion.

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). 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.

I draw mainly upon Catherine Bell's theory of ritualisation to explore entry into ISKCON in relation to ritual practices. Ritualisation, in the ISKCON context, is a strategy that facilitates 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 the meaning behind these rituals, gradual acceptance of ISKCON's

schemes of ritualisation, and, over the long-term, acquisition of ritual mastery. From a sociological perspective, entry into ISKCON is a three-staged process involving separation, transition, and incorporation. The stage of separation is a phase of accepting sets of oppositions concerned with polarities of purity and pollution, causing alienation from previous social circles and encouraging group-integration within ISKCON. The transitional stage is characterized by the internalisation of beliefs, worldviews and values. The stage of incorporation is marked by successive stages of seekership (searching for, and finding, meaning using ISKCON frameworks) and commitment (not just to ISKCON's values and ritual practices, but also to its missionary agenda). To determine how ritual practice constructs power relationships and creates boundaries for the development of active agency and passivity, I look at four dimensions of ritualisation. These are (following Bell): (1) the effects of ritual practice on socialisation and vice versa; (2) the role of ritual specialists; (3) the forms of misrecognition and blindness resulting from ritual practice; and (4) the influence of ritualisation on the agency of entrants.

My work demonstrates that “conversion” in the ISKCON context is marked by three crucial features. First, it is a process of gradual “drifting” into ISKCON's fold, not a sudden change. Second, conversion to ISKCON's belief system is facilitated by the adoption of the ritual practices central to ISKCON. Hence belief and practice are closely intertwined in the conversion process, with ritual practice serving, in most cases, as the entry point. And finally, my work demonstrates that this “conversion” does not entail a radical break with previously held religious beliefs and values. Instead, “converts” to ISKCON continue to profess their former faith, but now filter this through the lens of ISKCON's Vaishnava devotionism.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Research Aims

When, on the 19th of November 2011, I represented the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) at an interfaith conference organised by the Anglican Church in Leicester, the priest representing the Church of England introduced one of my colleagues as an ISKCON “convert” from a Roman-Catholic background. After the meeting, thinking about my own Roman-Catholic background, I reflected on whether or not I considered myself a “convert”. I realised that despite having been a Hare Krishna monk for more than twenty-three years,¹ I had never stopped identifying myself as a Christian. While I certainly gave up my identification as a Roman Catholic, I believe that since my entry into ISKCON I see myself as having become “a better Christian”. In other words, I have not left behind my Christian beliefs but rather continue to see and experience my Christian faith through the theological framework of ISKCON’s philosophy. Is my entry into ISKCON then best understood as “conversion”?

Scholars often use the term “convert” to refer to an individual who has left behind a certain set of beliefs to accept another set of beliefs. On this basis, scholars have developed various models of conversion. How far do these models of conversion adequately describe the process by which individuals from Western (Christian or secular) backgrounds enter ISKCON, an organisation with its roots in Hindu devotionalist traditions? The central argument of my research is that extant models of conversion do not do justice to the process by which individuals enter ISKCON and

¹ ISKCON adherents are commonly referred to as “Hare Krishnas” because the most visible aspect of their identity, and the core aspect of their devotional practice, is the collective chanting of the mantra “Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare”.

assimilate its values, beliefs, and practices. Though there have been a number of models attempting to explain and map conversion analytically, these prove to be inadequate when applied to the ISKCON case. This thesis thus critically examines conversion models/theories and seeks to refine our understanding of *conversion*, especially in groups in which daily ritual practice plays a central role, an aspect which I will examine in considerable detail in the pages to follow.

Conversion has traditionally been understood mainly in relation to Christianity. According to R. Anderson (2003, p.124), to convert to Christianity is to turn “from and to”, a process that implies that one must abandon one set of beliefs in order to embrace another. However, ISKCON entrants from Christian backgrounds often claim that they are still Christians, and that they now see their Christian belief through the framework of ISKCON’s Gaudiya-Vaishnava theology and practice. In these cases, conversion does not imply abandoning one religion in favour of another. Individuals may pick elements from previous and current affiliations. They may engage with the previous tradition using the framework provided by the new tradition. Non-Christian, and indeed non-Abrahamic, traditions (like ISKCON) can thus enable us to develop a more complex model for mapping processes of conversion.

L. Shinn (1989, pp.123-132) maintains that conversion implies not only a sudden decision to convert, but a lengthy process of gradual transformation. This is in contrast with the Pauline paradigm, associated with Paul’s vision on the road to Damascus, which is a model of sudden conversion. Individuals entering ISKCON go through a complex reasoned process of gradual contact and familiarisation with ISKCON’s beliefs and practices. This process generally involves a period of checking ISKCON out as participant observer, a time of coming in contact with the key

practices, followed by a period of intensified participation and a growing commitment.

I argue here that conversion should be understood in relation not just to systems of belief but also, and equally importantly, in relation to practice including key features relating to social interaction. The process of entering ISKCON is complex and does not always involve matters of “belief” as primary elements. Individuals’ discontent with various aspects of society, combined with various forms of personal dissatisfaction, often provides the impetus for seeking what is often perceived as a more simple, happy life as an ISKCON member. Once they adopt the ritual practices of the Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition they claim to perceive a positive effect on their quality of life. Engagement with ISKCON’s philosophy and theology generally follows only after the initial commitment to the practice.

In this thesis, I seek not to reject the category “conversion” but to refine our understanding of conversion processes in the light of my findings in relation to ISKCON entrants. I will engage, later in this chapter, with key developments in the scholarship on conversion, providing a review of the seminal literature on this subject. First however, the following section details some contextual information about ISKCON, describing the growth and expansion of this international movement over the last half century.

1.2. 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.² 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 presentation of Vaishnavism, a branch of Hinduism that centres on worship of Vishnu, or Krishna.³ 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

² "Krishna consciousness" refers to offering all one's activities to the deity Krishna with devotion.

³ 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.

exponential growth of the movement.⁴ It was a time of establishing temples worldwide and recruiting new members.⁵ 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. Meanwhile in India, two immense *samadhis*, or memorial buildings, were constructed in Vrindavana and Mayapur in memory of Bhaktivedanta (also known as Prabhupada). In 1987 half a million people attended ISKCON's Janmastami celebrations (marking the birthday of Krishna) in Bombay. 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.⁶ Thousands of congregation members conduct regular meetings in their homes. Since 2010 an immense temple building project – the Temple of Vedic Planetarium (TOVP) – has been started at ISKCON's world headquarters in Mayapur in rural West-Bengal. ISKCON Mayapur currently has more than five thousand residents. The TOVP will have museums and exhibits that will teach visitors the

⁴ Cole (2007, pp.30-35) offers an account of the first Hare Krishnas entering the UK and gives a summary of the history in the 1970s.

⁵ 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).

⁶ Source: <http://www.krishna.com/how-many-people-follow-krishna-consciousness> Accessed on: 4 April 2015.

Chaitanya Vaishnava understanding of the Vedas.⁷ It is anticipated that its dome (113 meters tall), will be completed in 2016.

ISKCON's transnational expansion developed side by side with the growth of its centralised institutional powers. To manage the international society, Bhaktivedanta established in 1970 the Governing Body Commission (GBC) as ISKCON's ultimate international managerial authority. The GBC consists of GBC Zonal Secretaries, that is, officers responsible for supervising ISKCON in one or more countries. Throughout its rapid expansion during the 1970s and up to the present day, the ISKCON GBC, and its geographic GBC representatives, have been instrumental in safe-guarding the society's international constitution and in keeping all worldwide ISKCON branches united under the institutional authority of an international Governing Body Commission.

During the approximately fifty years of ISKCON's history, many controversies and crises have beset the movement. Major internal crises centred on cases of child abuse in ISKCON's boarding schools, schismatic divisions resulting in the formation of two splinter groups, criticisms about ISKCON's patriarchal values and organisational structure, and a breach of faith between grass roots adherents and ISKCON leadership.

During the early 1970s, a *gurukula* boarding school was opened in Dallas. This school, especially in the 1980s, became known for several cases of child abuse during the 1970s. Child abuse in ISKCON was an important issue for ISKCON in North America but not in Europe. Nevertheless, the effects of the child abuse in the Bhaktivedanta *gurukula* boarding schools in North America, Mayapur (West-Bengal,

⁷ For further information: <http://tovp.org/> Accessed on: 4 April 2015.

India), and Vrindavana (Uttar Pradesh, India) involving American children have also affected the movement in Europe. These and further child abuse cases during the 1980s and the second half of the 1990s in ISKCON boarding schools in India, specifically in Vrindavana (Uttar Pradesh) and Mayapur (West-Bengal), led to a major court case in the United States against ISKCON.

Around the same time, two splinter groups appeared.⁸ After Bhaktivedanta's demise on 14 November 1977, the ISKCON GBC appointed eleven gurus and ISKCON was divided into eleven geographical zones. These eleven ISKCON gurus began accepting disciples. According to Vaishnava theology, a disciple has to approach the guru as he or she would approach God. The guru is accepted as a representative of God. However, the newly appointed gurus fell short of the standards envisaged by Bhaktivedanta and controversies soon arose. Some of the renounced (*sannyasi*) gurus went on to break their vows of celibacy and neglect their spiritual practices. The problems posed by these eleven gurus had a devastating effect on ISKCON. By 1987 the "zonal acarya" system had collapsed as half of the appointed gurus had left ISKCON. This deeply affected the faith of thousands of ISKCON devotees.

Many adherents left the movement, distanced themselves from ISKCON leadership and/or affiliated with splinter groups. One of these was led by B.V. Narayana Swami (a disciple of one of Bhaktivedanta's godbrothers,⁹ and a member of the Gaudiya Matha, the institution created by Bhaktisiddhanta, Bhaktivedanta's guru). ISKCON members were attracted by his learning and charisma, and sought his spiritual advice, choosing to move out of ISKCON to join the group now forming

⁸ Cole (2007, p.35) presents a detailed account of these two splinter groups, which emerged after the demise of Bhaktivedanta.

⁹ The term "godbrother" refers to male devotees who have the same guru, in this case Bhaktisiddhanta.

around him (Bloch, 2007, pp.4-11). A second splinter group to emerge at this time came to be known as Ritvikism. The followers of Ritvikism claimed that there was no need for gurus in ISKCON. The disciples of Bhaktivedanta could initiate on Bhaktivedanta's behalf (as indicated by the Sanskrit term *ritvik*, which means "officiating priest"). Such disciples would then become direct disciples of Bhaktivedanta. Many disgruntled ISKCON members joined the Ritvik movement. ISKCON leadership, however, deemed that Ritvikism ran contrary to the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* (a key Vaishnava text central to devotionism within ISKCON) and Chaitanya Vaishnavism, and declared the *ritvik* procedure as heresy (Bloch, 2007, pp.12-13).

A further critical juncture in ISKCON's fifty-year history was during the 1980s and early 1990s when women activists within ISKCON began to protest against their subordinate position within the organisation's hierarchy. They held discussions about the role of women in ISKCON and debated ISKCON's patriarchal organisation and values. As a result of these debates women gained a few privileges, such as the right to lecture on scriptures during the morning ceremonies in the temples outside of India and the right for equal facilities in temples in the Western countries. Rochford (2007, pp.115-159) maintains that whereas the protest by women activists did achieve significant gender reforms, it caused a male backlash. A group of traditionally minded men were organising to undermine the reforms. Yet they failed to prevent the gender reforms supporting gender equality. E. Puttick (in: Wilson, 1999, pp.144-161), examining the position of women in NRMs, claims that ISKCON propagates a conservative belief in female inferiority. Nonetheless, she observes that in ISKCON "the conditions for women are improving to the point where women may theoretically become gurus, but none have so far, intimidated by the lack of respect and role models" (ibid, p.157). She concludes that, while the status of women in

NRMs vary considerably, NRMs such as ISKCON respond to the voices of women members for greater equality. Also significant is Muster's (2004) personal account of her observations of residing in an ISKCON temple in America for ten years (1980s). Her story reflects the negative experiences of living in a patriarchal community that adopted the conservative Indian belief in female subordination.

The nineties were also a time when ISKCON worked on setting up educational systems and governing policies. Yet due to a breach of faith between the grass root adherents and ISKCON leadership, mainly because of past managerial failures and several cases of pastoral abuse of gurus, the situation became very precarious. In the first decade of the current century, the GBC started to work intensively on restoring that faith and on planning strategies for handing over the leadership of the movement to future generations.

ISKCON also encountered a number of crises in its relations with the outside world. During the second half of the 1970s ISKCON faced opposition from anti-cult movements in America expressing concerns about the alienation of ISKCON adherents from their friends and family. Another crisis in England related to the activities of Bhaktivedanta Manor, a major ISKCON centre in Watford, North London. ISKCON launched a major campaign to protect Bhaktivedanta Manor in the face of public threats to close the temple as a place of worship. Thousands of British Hindus were mobilised to challenge the public enquiry and to protest against the court's decision to close Bhaktivedanta Manor for public worship.¹⁰ The campaign was a success and a landmark achievement in the history of ISKCON UK.¹¹

¹⁰ See Knott (1995a); Nye (1997) and Cole (2007, pp.42-43) on the relationship between Britain's Hindu population and ISKCON in the context of this campaign.

¹¹ In the summer, especially on Sundays, there can be thousands of guests visiting Bhaktivedanta Manor at some time of the day (Cole, 2007, p.48).

The year 1987 was also characterized by worldwide protests against the imprisonment of twenty-three ISKCON devotees in jails and psychiatric clinics in Russia. In the former Soviet Union ISKCON adherents were considered members of a dangerous cult and enemies of the communist state. At the beginning of the 1990s, perestroika and the cultivation of Soviet ties with India helped ISKCON to develop in Russia. Yet the quick expansion of ISKCON in Russia soon provoked a backlash from the Russian Orthodox Church.

These controversies and crises were partly the result of the movement's exponential growth, an expansion resulting from the employment of particular proselytising strategies. During the early 1970s, when the movement's missionary spirit was high, *harinama*, the chanting of Krishna's names in the streets and the distribution of ISKCON's books were crucial proselytising activities. Book distribution, often combined with the sale of incense sticks conducted by temple residents, was ISKCON's main source of income. In ISKCON's early days book distribution depended fully on the commitment and full-time engagement of celibate residents of ISKCON temples. It depended therefore on ISKCON's commune-based structure of the 1970s, which discouraged marriage and the nuclear family. To be an ISKCON member during the 1960s and 1970s meant that one lived in an ISKCON temple. This understanding changed during the 1980s when most temple residents started to marry and move out of the temple to start a family. Thus the temples gradually emptied and ISKCON was reshaped into a congregation-based movement.¹² Because many celibate monks engaged in book distribution got married, the income generated by the book distribution shrank, so most temples faced financial difficulties.

¹² Rochford's multiple social studies on ISKCON are helpful in understanding its changing social organisation seen from the perspective of a participant-observer. He examined family life in ISKCON from early 1970s until the present day (see Rochford 2007; 2001; 1997; 1995). According to Rochford (2007, pp.52-73), in the 1970s, ISKCON was able to create an exclusive religious world in a communal context. But in the 1980s with the decline of the revenue of book distribution and the increase in family life, ISKCON was left with a cultural crisis and failed to sustain its traditional culture.

To solve the financial problem and to counteract the negative public opinion generated in large part by anti-cult movements stigmatising ISKCON as a “cult”, ISKCON started to align itself with Hindu communities all over the world. Rochford (2007, p.200) notes that ISKCON’s Indian Hindu congregation (in North-America) played a significant role in reviving what was otherwise a failing religious organisation. While book distribution continued to form an important source of income, its decline during the 1980s and 1990s was partially counterbalanced by financial support received from congregation members and supporters from Hindu communities.

Since the early days of ISKCON in the 1960s an important means of attracting newcomers has been the weekly Sunday feast, an event organised in all ISKCON temples. Book distributors often invite people to the Sunday feast programme, a traditional programme designed to bring outsiders in contact with the beliefs and the ritual practices such as the practice of chanting of Krishna’s names and the experience of eating *prasadam*, sanctified lacto-vegetarian food offered to Krishna. With the expansion of ISKCON’s congregation during the 1980s and 1990s, householder adherents began inviting other ISKCON followers and guests to meetings conducted in their private homes, or on special occasions in a rented hall.

The principle aim of the proselytising strategies in the form of book distribution, the public chanting of Krishna’s names (*harinama*), as well as temple-based or other outreach programmes, is to introduce people to ISKCON’s daily ritual practice. Entry into ISKCON, as demonstrated by this work, is centred on the performance of daily ritual practice, which is a key factor enabling the internalisation of beliefs. Whereas integration into ISKCON starts with the individual’s commitment to take up the practice of the daily rites, the person’s degree of incorporation and promotion to

higher rungs of ISKCON's hierarchy depends on his/her development of proficiency in the execution of daily rites.

1.3. Research on ISKCON

Scholarly interest in ISKCON has grown and intensified since the 1980s. Much of the research on ISKCON has been conducted by sociologists of religion interested in exploring particular aspects of ISKCON's ideology, organisation, and practice. The main concerns of these scholars include family organisation within ISKCON (Rochford, 2007), gender issues (Lorenz, 2004), issues of child abuse (Wolf, 2004), factors contributing to individuals leaving ISKCON (Gelberg, 1983), and ISKCON as a New Religious Movement (NRM) (Wilson, 1999). On an institutional level, scholars have mainly addressed schisms (Collins, 2004) and heresies (Bloch, 2007), and from a cultural perspective, they have been concerned with the tension between tradition and modernity (Bryant, 2004), ISKCON's building of relationships with Hindus in Britain (Nye, 1997), and ISKCON's Hinduization (Knott, 1987). In addition, some psychologists have done research on the mental health of ISKCON members (Ross, 1985), and a small number of insider scholars have addressed philosophical issues (Conrad, 2004). Scholarly literature on ISKCON mainly explores the connections between the behaviour and culture embraced by ISKCON adherents and the greater society in which they live. Some of the conclusions and patterns that emerge from the largely sociological analysis are relevant to my work. Below I will elaborate on a selection of the aforementioned scholarly work as it relates to my study.

Certain sections of this scholarly literature are helpful in describing the context into which individuals enter when they encounter ISKCON. Especially the literature that analyses tensions within ISKCON and the motivations, attitudes, and views of

ISKCON adherents, has been useful for my work. Because it offers a scholarly “outsider” view on what is happening in ISKCON, this literature has been helpful to some extent to situate the stories of my interviewees within an historical and social context. In particular the work of B. Rochford has been a resource for reconstructing the history of the movement in America during the 1970s and 1980s, the period prior to my own entry into ISKCON. Rochford has studied the Hare Krishnas since the 1970s. His main focus is to contribute to the sociology of religious organisations.

Rochford (1985) specifically looks at the experiences of ISKCON followers in the United States, analyzes recruitment patterns, and examines newcomers’ acceptance of a totally different life style within ISKCON. In his early work (1982) Rochford has been concerned with studies of recruitment to social movements. Focusing on the inter-relationship between recruitment strategy, ideology, and external social forces, he found that during the 1970s opportunistic adaptation to local conditions rather than ideology has been responsible for the exponential growth of the Hare Krishna movement in the United States. In his later work Rochford (2007) looked at the changing face of ISKCON and assessed how ISKCON transformed and reinvented itself in the midst of decline and crisis. He analysed how during the 1980s and 1990s, a period of economic decline, the communal temple life collapsed in favour of the emergence of a congregation of independent householders. Rochford looks into how the non-family-oriented temple life in the 1970s, characterized as it was by its radical goals and way of life, transformed into a family-based movement. The earlier communal structure that actively discouraged family life transformed into a structure that embraced the nuclear family. Rochford looks at the transition of children’s education from an *ashram*-based (*gurukula*) schooling system, prevalent in the 1970s, to public education in the 1980s and 1990s. Burke’s study of two generations of Hare Krishna adherents includes answering the question as to what

extent the second generation continues to identify with ISKCON. This involves issues concerning the position of women in ISKCON and the effects of child abuse on individuals and the movement in North America.

Burke did not explicitly analyse the entry process in the light of conversion theories but focused on the social changes of the movement in North America during the last three decades. Burke's work is a study of ISKCON's culture in which he especially looks at the changing social contexts in which ISKCON operates. ISKCON's developments in North America and Europe, for instance, have been different. There were no official ISKCON boarding schools in Europe and the extent of child abuse there has been limited compared to North America. Furthermore, in Europe the decline in the number of temple devotees in favour of the number of independent householders has not been as sharp as it has been in North America. Therefore, since ISKCON's changing cultural content in Europe differs from that in North America, we need to be careful in considering the relevance of Burke's work to ISKCON Europe and my own work.

More directly relevant to my own research are studies dealing directly with questions of recruitment, the "conversion" decision, and the effects of recruitment on the recruit's relationships within former social circles. G. D. Chryssides (1999, pp.259-270), concerned with the rise of Britain's anti-cult movement, looks at four types of groups that oppose New Religious Movements (NRMs): (1) secular groups that monitor NRMs, (2) Christian evangelical groups, (3) cult-specific groups, and (4) deprogrammers. Chryssides assesses the anti-cult achievements and the effect of the anti-cult movement. He concludes that because of the anti-cult movement's rise NRMs decided to reappraise their activities, create public relation departments, and inspire NRM leaders to talk to the media. While I do not quote from Chryssides'

work, his analysis of what caused the rise of the anti-cult movements points to a central theme within my discussion of the stages of entry. This first stage is often characterized by the alienation of adherents from their previous social circles. Chryssides (1999, p.258) in particular points to the radically different lifestyle of ISKCON converts, which, he argues, would appeal mainly to young members of society with fewer social ties. What tends to fuel anti-cult sentiments, according to Chryssides (ibid, p.161), is a combination of losing one's children to NRMs, the breaking up family ties, those children giving up their studies and adopting austere conditions (e.g., another diet) as signs of a radically different lifestyle. In Chapter Four, I analyse the primary reasons behind ISKCON adherents' alienation from former circles and adopting a different lifestyle. The adherents' motives to keep a barrier between themselves and their previous social milieu are, within an ISKCON context, strongly related to the restrictions imposed by daily ritual practice.

Weiss and Comrey (1987) analysed the personality characteristics of 132 male and 94 female adherents of the Hare Krishna movement from eight US sites using "personality scales". Their most prominent findings (which to some extent support those of Chryssides) are that the majority of ISKCON members they studied exhibited a strong compulsive trait and a reduced trust in society, indicating a level of alienation from the greater society. In addition, Weiss and Comrey (1987), Ross and Rochford (1983; 1985), Purvis and Eastman (1989) have been concerned with the mental health, clinical profiles, and personality characteristics of Hare Krishna adherents. Their conclusions are that on personality tests ISKCON members generally score within the normal range. Considering that I do not employ psychological methods in my work, I only refer to their conclusion that ISKCON adherents exhibit a reduced trust in society at large. This distrust is mainly the result of adherents undergoing a process of inculturation that includes Bhaktivedanta's critical views on society, a phenomenon

that will be discussed in Chapter Five in which I discuss various categories of blindness to ritualisation schemes.

The acceptance of a totally different lifestyle, the cultivation of distrust in mainstream society, and the ensuing isolation from the outside world, are important issues with a direct bearing on the “conversion” process, and will be addressed in this thesis when analysing the narrative accounts provided by my interviewees. The question about the rupture with everyday society has been significantly reduced since the 1980s, a period characterized by the exodus of ISKCON temples and a rise of the practice of the beliefs and rituals as congregation members within the core of family life.

The issue of conversion is central to the study of J. Leman and H. Roos (2007, p.331) who, in 2005 and 2006, conducted fieldwork at a Belgian ISKCON temple. The focus of their fieldwork was to ascertain the development members undergo from adepts to full-time temple residents. Their first concern was to find out whether Hare Krishna members see themselves as converts, and what their entry into ISKCON means for them as a comprehensive experience. They conclude: “Adepts see their conversion as a slow process, not really a conversion, but a deepening of something that existed already. By deepening they meant seeing things in a broader frame”. This corroborates my finding that ISKCON adherents often do not reject their previous religious beliefs and practices. Rather, they come to see them through the lens of Chaitanya Vaishnava theology, which they accept as a universal framework of truths. This is further discussed in Chapter Five, which deals with the dynamics of how individuals get incorporated into ISKCON.

The fieldwork of Leman and Roos was based on about thirteen interviews with active members in an ISKCON temple in Belgium. It is noteworthy that they use the term “conversion” to describe the experience of individuals’ entry into ISKCON without explaining its exact meaning within the framework of their research. Can entry into ISKCON be understood as *conversion*? As noted earlier, my work seeks not to reject the term but to refine the understanding of *conversion* by demonstrating that the term *conversion* relates to a gradual “long-term” process rather than to a radical break; a process in which there remains a connection with the previous religion or culture.

Most relevant to my work has been L. D. Shinn’s research on ISKCON, which focused on gaining insight into the distinction between a conversion decision and a conversion process. Shinn (1987, p.10) first studied ISKCON’s scriptural tradition at Princeton University during his doctoral study in Hindu and Buddhist traditions of India and Asia. His dissertation is concerned with a study of the *Bhagavata Purana*, a Sanskrit scripture about Krishna’s exploits, a text revered by ISKCON and the followers of the Chaitanya tradition. In 1972, Shinn received a PhD degree from the Princeton University. Around 1980, he started reviewing psychological literature on conversion and decided to base his psychological studies on fieldwork performed among ISKCON adherents in America. Shinn looked at anti-cult studies done by persons who studied religious groups by examining ex-adherents and then made general statements. Shinn applied these statements to other groups and attended many anti-cult conferences organised by anti-cult groups and authors. Throughout his work he rebuts the powerful and pervasive brainwashing cult images and stereotypes prevalent in America. Shinn’s main argument is that the generalisations and assumed homogeneity of cults in America is not factual and does not give any insight in the conversion process. Shinn’s study is a rebuttal of what he calls the *anti-cult thesis*: “A

greedy or power-hungry guru or his successors seduces new converts into a completely submissive faith and life by brainwashing them. The only avenue out of cults for a member, therefore, is to be deprogrammed so that the cult spell can be broken” (ibid, p.24).

Shinn (1987, pp.135-143) maintains that anti-cultists use the word “brainwashing” as a rhetorical device. He argues that the term is not a useful description of the conversion process. Rather, conversion to NRMs is not a psychological process but a sociological one. Psychiatrists and clinical psychologists who relate brainwashing to coercive methods of mind control over others have promoted the use of the term (cf. Conway and Siegelman, 1979; Singer, 1983). Even so, T. Robbins and D. Anthony (1980, pp.66-67) claim that the validity of the term as a scientific concept is problematic. It has been used as “a rationale for persecuting unpopular movements and defining converts as nonautonomous zombies who can be coerced for therapeutic purposes.” In addition, they argue that psychiatry lacks evidence, expertise, and clinical experience to prove the validity of alleged brainwashing.

Shinn found that ISKCON adherents failed to completely apply in their lives the *totalistic* beliefs and life-style of ISKCON so feared by anti-cultists. He claimed that they have as much difficulty to apply their own teachings in their lives as did the Christian apostle Paulus, who said, “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Rom. 7:18-19) (ibid, p.74).

Shinn also discussed the place of women and children in ISKCON and addressed the questionable selling techniques used by adherents to distribute their

books and secular paraphernalia (ibid, p.113). Furthermore, he analysed several cases of abducted adherents who had undergone deprogramming. Shinn concluded that “both parents and children can be victims of the anti-cult rhetoric of fear and suspicion that lead to deprogrammings that fail” (ibid, p.169). The failed deprogrammings caused a definite breach between children and parents.

Shinn also took part in several social science conferences that focused on NRMs in America. For three months, he lived in fourteen Hare Krishna temples and farms in America and two in India. He conducted a five-year study on ISKCON mainly based on interviews and participant observation. Shinn conducted more than one hundred interviews with ISKCON adherents (with on average three hours per interview). He focused on pertinent events, leading up to initial contact with ISKCON and the decision to join the movement. To this end he interviewed adherents on all levels of ISKCON’s hierarchy, that is, from newly-initiated devotees up to established gurus (Shinn, 1989, pp.117-134). Shinn published the conclusions of his research in *The Dark Lord: Cult Images and the Hare Krishnas in America* (1987).

After studying ISKCON for five years, Shinn (1989, p.117) realised that entering ISKCON not only involves a “conversion decision” but also a complex *process*. Shinn analyses two conversion stories. The first is the story of Sita, who joined ISKCON quite suddenly, and the second is an account of Rama, whose journey of entering ISKCON is gradual, a story that runs over a number of years. Shinn maintains that if one looks only at Sita’s sudden joining, hers would appear to be a case of a “conversion decision”. However, after joining ISKCON, Shinn demonstrates, Sita underwent a deep process of theological and spiritual maturation very similar to Rama’s journey. Despite her sudden entrance into the movement, Sita

underwent a “conversion process” which entailed an enduring search for meaning, and gradual internalisation of theological values and worldviews.

Shinn uses the stories of Sita and Rama to share insights into the complexities surrounding the distinction between a *conversion* and a *conversion process*. In his essay Shinn (1989) focuses on critiquing certain psychological theories on conversion. He claims that W. James’s (1985 [1902]) early definition of conversion would classify Sita’s case as a *sudden conversion*, an experience comparable with the conversions of Paul, Moses, and Mohammed.¹³ Shinn argues that critics of cults in America have used *crisis conversions* such as Sita’s to demonstrate that these result from deceptive processes such as brainwashing, mind control, or coercive persuasion. Such theories, Shinn claims, stem from S. Freud’s views on religious conversions “as a pathology analogous to a child neurosis”. Developing theories based on Freud’s concept, L. Salzman in 1953 and C. Christensen in 1963 maintained that sudden conversion arises from guilt, anger, and other “destructive preconversion attitudes”. Shinn argues that such psychological theories are inadequate to explain Sita’s case because psychoanalytical or social explanations that focus solely on her conversion *decision* neglect the maturing conversion *process* she underwent (Shinn, 1989, pp.117-131).

The data of the present research supports two of Shinn’s findings: that entering ISKCON entails a process of gradual transformation, and that converts to ISKCON participate in an enduring search for meaning. Shinn used three sources of information for his research: (1) participant observation, (2) selected literature on ISKCON, and (3) personal interviews. Shinn’s position is that of an outsider trying to enter ISKCON through participant observation. The primary reason why Shinn may not have fully

¹³ W. James: “To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain assurance, are so many phases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hither undivided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy... whatever or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about” (in: Shinn, 1989, p.129).

recognized the process of incorporation into ISKCON is that his study does not engage with the centrality of ritual in ISKCON and its significance for the conversion process. Therefore, he may not have gained an in-depth understanding of the relationship between ritual practice and the multiple levels of seekership and commitment which most ISKCON entrants experience. During the incorporation process of individuals who enter into ISKCON ritual experience, seekership, and commitment are important factors of agency. This maturation process occurs after what Shinn calls “the conversion decision”, that is, joining a community. My work will provide these additional insights into the entry process by means of exploring the place ritual has in the lives of ISKCON entrants.

A further issue directly related to the conversion question has to do with why ISKCON members (“converts”) subsequently leave ISKCON. Whereas Edwin Bryant’s (2004) work on ISKCON contains personal stories of ex-ISKCON members, there is no scholarly analysis of the reasons why ISKCON members leave the Hare Krishna movement. An important piece of primary material in this regard is the story of Muster (2004, pp.312-320), who narrates her ten-year experience as a devotee living at ISKCON’s Western world headquarters in Los Angeles at the end of the 1970s and the 1980s. Her account reflects her negative experiences as a female ISKCON member. Muster (2004, p.315) describes her time in ISKCON as a time of “living under a cloud of chauvinism and outright hatred of our gender”. Muster’s account shows an utmost respect for Bhaktivedanta, the founder of ISKCON, whom she praises for giving women equal opportunities for engaging in ISKCON’s mission. While her testimony criticises ISKCON and is mainly concerned with the reasons why she left ISKCON, it shows also that her attraction to Bhaktivedanta’s life and example has been a major reason for her journey into ISKCON. Bhaktivedanta’s teachings remain a source of inspiration for ISKCON entrants today. The gender inequality,

although a source of crises and controversies in ISKCON, remains outside the scope of the present study. While some of the women I interviewed offered detailed and significant accounts of their entry into ISKCON, I have not used these accounts to identify gender-based differences in interview narratives.

A recent publication on ISKCON that is noteworthy here is T. K. Goswami's (2012) work. He presents a study of core aspects of the theology presented by Bhaktivedanta. Goswami argues that there is a paucity of serious scholarship that has examined A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami's thought. He maintains that research on ISKCON has generally lacked sufficient reflexivity, and scholars have "routinely failed to critique the grounds on which they stood and imported value-laden theories and methods that to a degree determined their observed data" (ibid, pp. 39-55). In the second part of his book, Goswami offers a scholarly synthesis of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami's thought within its historical framework. Goswami argues that scholars are often unfamiliar with the historical context in which ISKCON originated (the colonial and missionary contexts in which its forebears worked to promote Chaitanya Vaishnavism in India) and hence are often biased in their conclusions. His work serves as an important reminder to scholars like me of the need for setting so-called "New Religious Movements" like ISKCON in appropriate socio-historical context, and for analysing recent data in relation to this larger context. In Chapter Two, where I introduce the historical background leading up to the establishment of ISKCON, I will carefully explain the historical context of ISKCON's ritual-centred strategies as they emerged through the missionary activities of Bhaktivedanta and his predecessor-gurus during the nineteenth and twentieth century. This has an important bearing on interpretations of ISKCON's ritual practice today. I have also used references from Goswami's work to explain ISKCON's beliefs and practices in Chapter Three and to illustrate the overall historical context presented in Chapter Two. Moreover, Goswami

supplied an historical insight into why ISKCON adherents do not seek guidance from non-ISKCON gurus. I discuss this insight in Chapter Four, in the section where I explain the role of the guru.

1.4. Scholarship on “Conversion”

As I have already noted, “conversion” is a central theme in this study. There has been a growing body of literature on the question of conversion in recent times. Whereas much of the initial scholarship was centred on the standard Pauline model of conversion to Christianity, this model has come to be rigorously critiqued in anthropological and other studies. There is also a growing body of scholarship on conversion to faiths other than Christianity – both to ‘world religions’ like Judaism and Islam and (especially in the sociology of religion) to New Religious Movements (NRMs). In this section I present these major foci in scholarship on conversion. Themes addressed in the literature range from the convert’s identity and the politics and power in conversion processes to those concerned with conditions leading to conversion, the socio-psychological factors that lead to conversion, the stages in the conversion process, and the significance not just of pre-disposing factors but also of the convert’s agency and decision-making power.

Within the framework of Christian theology, the word conversion refers to a radical and sudden change. This understanding, applied by Evangelical Christians for several centuries, is related to the Pauline paradigm associated with Paul’s vision on the road to Damascus (Rambo, 2003, p.213). The influence of the Pauline conversion model on defining conversion is probably strongest within Christian groups. Most definitions of conversion are clearly aligned with Christianity. The English word “conversion” is derived from the Latin *convertere*, which means “to resolve, turn

around” or “head in a different direction” (Gooren, 2010, p.7). Such a “turn around” may suggest an unlearning of the “old” and learning of the “new”. Robert Anderson (2003, p.124), observing that according to the Bible to convert to Christianity is to turn “from and to” (Corinthians 16:15; Romans 16:5; Timothy 3:6), argues that defining the process in these terms limits inquiry, because it implies a prior assumption that one must abandon one set of beliefs and practices in order to embrace another.

According to R. W. Hefner (1993), in the nineteenth century the conversion to a world religion (especially Christianity) was seen as a part of a natural, inevitable “civilizing process” (see also Van der Veer, 1999). In addition S. D. Glazier (2003) observes that studies on religious conversion in the twentieth century reflect a strong Western bias, because they are often predicated on an assumed Euro-Christian monopoly on truth.

The Pauline paradigm has been developed, challenged, refined, and extended to other traditions. A development, challenging and refining the paradigm, is the view that conversion involves the gradual construction of a religious identity. Approaching conversion from a socio-psychological perspective, R. Travisano (1970) considers individual choice shaped by personality to be the primary factor in conversion. His interviews with Jews turning to Christianity (Hebrew Christians) and Jews adopting Unitarianism (Jewish Unitarians) brought him to the conclusion that “the Hebrew Christian has broken with his/her past and the Jewish Unitarian has not” (in: Gooren, 2010, pp.24-25). For Travisano, the Hebrew Christians underwent conversion, because they experienced a deep change of identity. That change, Travisano claims, occurred because they exchanged one universe of discourse for another. Conversely, the Jewish Unitarians did not experience such a radical change and did not undergo

conversion but rather only 'alteration' (Travisano, 1970, p.600). He concludes that conversion involves the "ubiquitous utilisation of an identity" and "strive to make their new identity central to almost all interactions" (ibid, p.605).

M. J. Sallnow (1987) extends the paradigm further by finding that identities are not fixed and rigid but rather syncretic, demonstrating that belief and practice can borrow from more than one religious source. He observed that religious movements that transgress boundaries offer a forum to express oneself or open up new areas. Concerned with Andean religiosity, Sallnow looks at the religion of converts in terms of syncretism. He observed how local Andean culture exists in harmony with aspects of Catholicism, in particular with regard to pilgrimage. His book describes the relationship between the miraculous shrines of the Cusco area and the ways they related to non-Christian local religiosity. Sallnow analyses the links between the "miraculous shrines", representing the native beliefs in the nature of the spirits, and the Christian sites, focusing on patron saints praised in local communities. In essence, the miraculous shrines disconnect Christianity from its ecclesiastic authorities, taking it out into the isolated field of Andean fertility and reproduction. Sallnow's work looks at religious syncretism as an undefined mixing of old and new beliefs and practices.

The Comaroffs (1991; 1997) further problematise the identity question by demonstrating the place of modernity in the process of conversion to Christianity. Looking at colonization, they stress the exchange of signs, beliefs, and values by both the colonizer and the colonized. Jean and John Comaroff's (1991; 1997) work is concerned with colonialism and points to a mixing of culture, beliefs, and practices and to alterations in the beliefs and practices of both colonizers and colonized. They explore the historical engagement between the people who became known as "the

Tswana” and their nineteenth-century colonisers in South Africa. They examine the signs and discourse of primarily the London Missionary Society and the changes and influence that occurred through their efforts to spread Christianity. The Comaroffs’ account shows how signs and practices amalgamated into one another. Conversion in South African contexts was not only concerned with conversion to Christianity but also with conversion to modernity. Indigenous people used the ideas and practices imported by European missionaries and integrated them into the developing economy and the social structure of modernity. It was not just about belief but also about introducing irrevocable changes in the lifestyles of those colonized. The study reveals the ways in which Europeans and Africans were both profoundly altered in the course of their inter-cultural encounter. The Comaroffs’ study is concerned with domination and resistance and the complex dialectic underlying the colonial encounter, a dialectic mediated by social differences and cultural distinctions that transformed the body and minds of everyone and everything caught up in it, even if not in the same way. Jean and John Comaroff (1997, p.vvii) maintain that there was an exchange of signs and objects spanning over a century rather than a straightforward process of conversion. In addition, their study, while addressing the issues of the missionary power and the politics of conversion, seems to confirm that conversion has historically followed a pattern of the more powerful converting the powerless. Conversely, ISKCON, a West-Bengal Vaishnava tradition and part of an immense former colony, has an impact among erstwhile colonizers because it is spreading its tradition in Western countries. Still, Jean and John Comaroff’s work demonstrates the complexity of renegotiating beliefs and practices as a result of encounters between different religions and cultures and indicates that mixing the old and the new is not random but the result of a complex process.

R. S. Norris (2003) broadens the identity question by claiming that conversion involves both a converting *to* and a converting *from* an embodied worldview and identity. This includes that conversion primarily occurs because particular aspects of the newly discovered worldview, practice and/or beliefs correspond with the convert's pre-existing ideas or feelings about truth and meaning and that converts exhibit two ways of relating to the laws and rituals of their adopted religion: zealous adherence or selective performance. Norris (2003) refers to the term *conversion* as "a voluntary adoption, for personal spiritual reasons, of a religion or set of beliefs other than the one with which the convert was brought up" (Norris, 2003, p.172). Norris claims that the process of assimilating the belief and practices of the adopted religion only starts after the convert discovers that it is the right tradition precisely because it corresponds to something already existing. In 1994, Norris interviewed converts from Jewish and Christian backgrounds in the Boston area (USA), and she shares the following observations.

The first observation is that conversion primarily occurs because particular aspects of the encountered beliefs and practice correspond with the convert's pre-existing ideas or feelings about truth and meaning. Second, converts either zealously adhere to their adopted religion or accept and adhere to certain practices of the new religion while rejecting others. In this regard Norris observes that some Sufi (Muslim mystic) converts adopt only those practices and beliefs that concur with pre-established cultural viewpoints. In addition, there is Norris' case study of R. L. who converted to Orthodox Christianity and still considered herself a Jew, because she saw Orthodox Christianity as an extension of Judaism. Norris (2003, p.174) argues that it is only after discovering that "this is the *right* tradition, precisely because it corresponds to something already existing that the process of assimilating the doctrine and rituals begins". Thus, Norris proposes to extend the meaning of conversion by

pointing to case studies that demonstrate how converts accepted the principles of a new faith while remaining connected with their previous faith.

A. Buckser (2003) demonstrates that a change of identity does not always involve assimilation of corresponding beliefs. Buckser discusses the meaningfulness of marriage conversions or social conversions. Marriage conversions are produced from mixed marriages (in this case, individuals with a different background convert to Orthodox Judaism, the religion of their marriage partners). Orthodox Judaism places greater weight on practice than on belief. Such conversions involve accepting a set of relationships with other members, a set of practices and habits, etc. Buckser (2003, pp.69-82) observes that social converts are often able to assimilate the practical elements without internalising the corresponding beliefs. He demonstrates that an atheist can be a perfectly observant Jew. Without explicitly dealing with the question whether or not such conversion are religious or not, he calls them social or marriage conversions instead of religious conversions.

Thus, Buckser (2003) analyses conversion as a social event and argues that conversion to a religion is an irreducibly social act, because it does not only change the individual but also alters the group the convert joins or gives up. Based on fieldwork in the Jewish community of Copenhagen (Denmark), Buckser observes that the vast majority of the conversions in that community were social conversions stemming from mixed marriages. Buckser also claims that social conversions, which are based on social considerations such as marriage, are not less authentic than those based on religious inspiration.

In his conclusion, Buckser explains that studies of religious conversion have often focused on conversion's experiential dimensions, that is, the experience of

converts, the social context, and the circumstances that shaped the context of conversion. Much less has been said about conversion as a social event, a phenomenon with meanings and consequences for the social group in which they occur. The community must address how to socialize with the new converts and how to establish the authenticity of conversion.

R. T. Anderson (2003) argues that the acceptance of a religious identity can be a personal and social experience and a cultural event. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Iceland in 1998 and 2001, Anderson compares and contrasts different conversion situations and interprets the conversion processes along a spectrum, varying from total constraint to total freedom. Conversion, Anderson claims, must involve a movement from one pattern of religious practice to another. He argues that such a movement only occurs when state authorities have the power to enforce religious affiliations. When authorities lack such power conversion involves selective adoption of practices (Anderson, 2003, p.*xvii*). He points out that at the turn of the first millennium, Icelanders adopted only particular practices of Christianity rather than undergoing a complete transformation. One of the examples Anderson cites goes back to the tenth century, a time when Icelanders were forced to convert from belief in Nordic gods to Christianity. In 1000 BCE, an assembly of Icelanders recommended that Iceland should convert to Christianity, but they would not forbid any individual to continue worshipping the Nordic gods. Anderson's interpretation of the Icelanders' conversion to Christianity in terms of constraint and freedom offers another angle of research on the relation between situations and attitudes before and after conversion.

R. Robinson and S. Clarke (2003, pp.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 movements. While their historical contributions show that “a considerable degree of homogenization has taken place, there are still plenty of ‘syncretic’ identities to be observed” (Gellner, p.941) In the introduction to their work, they examine whether the term ‘conversion’ can be used outside Islam and Christianity, for the term is mostly associated with these traditions. They conclude that the changes of religious identity, especially outside Christianity, are often incompatible with the Pauline paradigm, that is, a pattern of conversion that advocates a total rejection of one’s past. In addition, they claim that the idea of religious conversion was one that came to a theological elite, not to the common people, who may have a rather different understanding of the term ‘conversion’.

Robinson and Sathianathan point out that Christianity and Islam both demand from its neophytes a complete abandonment and renunciation of all the elements of their former faith. Robinson and Sathianathan note that it may be more relevant to understand conversion as requiring a proper initiation ritual, an exclusive adherence to a set of dogmas, and an abandonment of all other beliefs. Yet they see that option as extreme and only one among a range of possibilities. They conclude that at the outset conversion should in no way be invested with Christian-centred assumptions.

Discussing Western women’s conversions to Islam, A. M. McGinty (2006, p.6) has been concerned with the identity formation of some female Muslim converts. She conducted an ethnographic study based on interviews with Swedish and American women. She approaches conversion as a cognitive and cultural phenomenon, exploring converts’ sense of self as Swedish Muslims or American Muslims through a phenomenological approach to their experiences. McGinty looks at how converts appropriate a religious belief, integrate it into their personal life, and communicate their change of identity to the surrounding world. She demonstrates that conversion is

often triggered by certain personal ideas and quests, which women within Islam continue to explore after their conversion.

After reviewing the scholarship dealing with conversion from and to Christianity and the other Abrahamic faiths and discussing the shift from the Pauline paradigm of sudden and radical conversion to conversion models that imply a gradual change in religious identity, I will discuss, in chronological order, the literature on conversion to NRMs. This literature mainly approaches conversion from a sociological perspective.

First there is the work of J. Lofland and R. Stark (1965) whose model will be explained in detail in Chapter Six. They constructed a conversion model based on their fieldwork and observations of a small millenarian cult headquartered in Bay City (West Coast, California), a faith community established by the American following of Mr Chang, who attracted more than five thousands converts in Korea in 1954. The “Divine Precepts”, the doctrine revealed to him by God, concerns a complete “Restoration of the World” to the conditions of the Garden of Eden by 1967. The cult was operating as the Unification Church, the so-called Moonies (Lofland and Stark, 1965, p.862).

Crucial elements of Lofland and Stark’s (1965, p.864) theory are that conversion occurs when a crisis or tension gives rise to a sense of seekership which evolves within a religious problem-solving perspective. In other words, converts engage in a search for meaning because they experience a severe life crisis. Lofland and Stark claim that these elements, combined with an affective and intensive interaction between the prospective convert and one or more members of a religious movement, result in conversion.

During the 1970s, the Lofland-Stark conversion model was the most refined and critiqued conversion model within sociological literature. Scholars who tested the model claimed that several components of the model are questionable. While reviewers affirm the importance of affective and intensive interaction in conversion, the key elements of crisis and religious seekership are often seen as consequences rather than precipitants of conversion (Snow and Phillips, 1980, p.443). The model has later been further refined by scholars such as Rambo (1993) and Gooren (2010).

The focus on the importance of social interaction indicates another progression in the study of conversion. During the late 1970s, J. Richardson and M. Stewart (1978, pp.33-34) proposed a dynamic model of conversion consisting of three broad categories: prior socialisation, contemporary experiences and circumstances, and the opportunity structure. Following conventional sociological models, they stressed the importance of social networks. In addition they claimed that modern versions of the passive paradigm include the “brainwashing” or mind control models for which there is little empirical evidence (ibid, p.166). According to Richardson and Stewart (ibid, pp.33-34), conversion will always occur when there are positive affectionate ties with members of the religious group. Snow and Machalek (1984, p.183) confirm Richardson and Stewart’s viewpoint: “A positive, interpersonal tie to one or more group members can function as an information bridge, increase the credibility of appeals, and intensify the pressure to accept those appeals and corresponding practices.” When there are negative ties with group members, however, the potential convert will never convert. Therefore, Richardson and Stewart first looked at social factors and considered them more important than identity construction or other incidental factors. They saw conversion as a process involving socialisation and the cultivation of affective bonds. Both Richardson and Stewart’s (1978) work and J. T.

Richardson's (1978a) article, published in *Sage Contemporary Social Science*, are concerned with conversion careers in and out of NRMs. Richardson (1978a), taking the perspective of the sociology of religion and social psychology, viewed conversion as a complex process that involves behavioural as well as cognitive changes (Brown, 2003, p.143). Richardson argued that in the early eighties a new paradigm in studies of religion emerged. The old paradigm that viewed conversion as passive and deterministic was replaced by a new one that approached conversion from the angle of active agency (Richardson, 1985a, pp.163-179). Long and Hadden (1983, pp.1-4), however, proposed to combine the active and passive conversion paradigms as a method for analysing entry into religious groups. Thus questions of motivation, search for meaning, and identity construction through active agency became a primary theme in conversion studies. There is an evolution in the study of conversion, congruent with Richardson's paradigm shift, from seeing converts as passive victims – exposed to the influence of cult advocates – to seeing them as agents playing an active role of directing their own conversion through motivation and choosing between religious options.

Sociological studies on conversion do not only emphasize the importance of socialisation but also point to a complexity of elements surrounding social interaction, such as a change of values and behaviour. Snow and Machalek (1984), concerned with the sociology of conversion, review research on conversion (before 1984), particularly in the context of NRMs. They address three issues pertinent to the study of conversion: first, the conceptualisation and nature of conversion; second, the analytic status of convert's accounts; and third, the causes of conversion. They discuss three indicators of conversion: membership status, demonstration events, and rhetorical patterns. In their survey of sociological studies of conversion, they conclude that conversion entails changes in values, beliefs, identities, and, most importantly, a

change in the universe of discourse. Focusing on the change of identity as a primary factor of conversion, Travisano (1970, p.605), in his social psychological model, claimed that “conversion involves the ubiquitous utilization of an identity” and that “converts strive to make their new identity central to almost all interactions.”

Considering the change of the universe of discourse as a rhetorical pattern, Snow and Machalek claim that individuals who actively participate in rituals but do not change their worldview cannot be considered converts. A convert’s change of discourse and adoption of a new way of life should be discernible in his or her speech and reasoning, biographical reconstruction, and adoption of behaviour and rituals (Snow and Machalek, 1984, pp.170-173).

The works of Richardson and Snow and Machelek indicate that conversion needs to be understood beyond the simplistic notion of abandoning one set of beliefs to accept another. They claim that conversion implies a shift of behaviour and involves cognitive changes (internalisation), including a change of identity, values, lifestyle, and worldview. Notwithstanding the consideration that cognitive changes resulting from conversion require study from a psychological perspective, L. R. Rambo (1993) considered psychology alone to be insufficient to interpret conversion. Therefore, he turned to sociology to explore the nature of cults and NRMs. He conducted interviews with converts from a variety of background such as converts embracing the Unification Church, Jews who became Christians, Christians who became Jews, Japanese secularists who adopted Christianity, Chinese people who had become Christians. From Rambo’s work it appears that his focus is not solely on NRMs but also on “world religions”.

Rambo (1993, p.1) looks at conversion from a very broad perspective, that is, one that includes the options of syncretism and breaches of beliefs and practice. He is

concerned with the question how and why people convert. To answer this question, Rambo, seeking a cross-cultural and cross-religious approach, developed a seven-staged motivational conversion model. His conversion model is a further refinement of the Lofland and Stark (1965) model developed in the 1960s.¹⁴ Rambo maintains that conversion is a process of religious change, a process over time, and not a single event (ibid, p.5). What is central in that process of change is a quest for meaning, a search for new options out of dissatisfaction with an existing situation or because of a desire for innovation (ibid, p.59). For Rambo, the ‘quest’ stage refers to situations in which individuals need a resolution, a call for meaning that induces a receptiveness to conversion experiences. The impetus to search for meaning is often triggered by a crisis or by some sort of tension (p.47).

Suggesting a new approach to the study of religious movements, Austin-Broos (2001, pp.1-10), in line with Rambo, points out that the conversion process is remarkably diverse. To be converted means to re-identify, to learn, reorder, and reorient. She describes conversion as a type of passage that negotiates a place in the world; a passage that is constituted and reconstituted through the articulation of new forms of relatedness. Her work is a study of how Jamaican religious people have accepted Pentecostalism and re-shaped it for their environment. Pentecostalism is a renewal movement (NRM) within Protestant Christianity that emphasises a direct experience of God through baptism with the Holy Spirit. Her study of Jamaican Pentecostalism comprises a comparative analysis of a number of dimensions. She claims that the divergent aspects of Pentecostalism’s development in Jamaica can only be understood if one recognized that “cultures both change themselves and also assimilate other forms of practice to their own continuing logics” (Austin-Broos, 1997, p.xxi). Understanding the dynamics of Jamaican culture and its power to

¹⁴ Rambo’s and Lofland and Stark’s models are explained in detail in Chapter Six.

assimilate new beliefs and practices are crucial elements to comprehend how the Jamaican religious people have accepted Pentecostalism and re-shaped it for their environment (ibid, p.xxii). Austin-Broos looked historically at how early Jamaicans of African origin interpreted Christianity and how the Jamaican practice of Pentecostalism was reformed in a similar way when introduced during the 1910s and 1920s. Biblical figures, for instance, acquired new meanings. The water baptism, especially baptism by complete immersion, received a meaning akin to an African tradition. In addition, music became an embodiment of worship rather than a frame for worship (ibid, pp.1-4). In brief, Austin-Broos demonstrates that there remains a connection with the previous religion or culture. She accepts conversion as a “turning from and to” but specifies that it results in neither syncretism nor an absolute breach (Austin-Broos, 2003, p.1). Priest (as discussed in Buckser 2003b: xvi), looking at the notion of sin among Aguaruna converts in Brazil, offers a practical example of how conversion is neither syncretism nor absolute breach. He argues that the concept of sin is not a uniquely Western concept but was also known within the Aguaruna culture. While retaining their notion of sin from their native culture, Aguaruna converts to Christianity changed only the direction of blame. The converts saw themselves as culpable for their own sins, which previously they would have attributed to witchcraft and spirits.

T. K. Brown (2003), following Richardson’s line of thought, maintains that the concept of conversion as a “shift in one’s system of beliefs” is problematic. Brown’s fieldwork, conducted between October 1995 and September 1997, shows that people come to Christian Spiritualist Churches in San Diego, California, to find proof of the existence of spirits and the afterlife. That implies, he argues, that many members of the Spiritualist Church are not entirely convinced that spiritual existence is real, and even if they become convinced, they may not remain so indefinitely. Therefore,

Brown, arguing that the idea of conversion as a shift in one's belief system is problematic, prefers to define conversion as both a shift in behaviour as well as a shift in belief.

M. Mendozz (2003, p.199) points out that "one of the most fascinating topics in the study of conversion and commitment", as confirmed by Rambo (1993), "is the nature of people's motivation for conversion". Recently, H. Gooren (2010), examined why people become religiously active. In addition, Gooren wanted to ascertain whether a religious conversion experience can turn someone into a different person. He used a conversion approach, a scheme that includes all the phases of participation in one or more religious organisations during a person's lifetime. For his research he referred to literature on conversion to Islam, Orthodox Judaism, and NRMs. In addition, Gooren identifies individual factors from conversion stories relating to the expression of a need:

- 1) A personal need to become religiously involved;
- 2) A personal need to give concrete expression to feelings of meaning-making or meaninglessness;
- 3) A personal need to seek meaning and/or spirituality in a religious group;
- 4) A personal need to change one's life situation;
- 5) Certain character traits conducive to religious participation (for example, anxiety, insecurity, sociability) (Gooren 2010, p.139).

Looking at patterns of change in faith practices, Gooren understands conversion as a "comprehensive personal change of religious worldview and identity," a change derived from levels of increasing religious participation: pre-affiliation, affiliation, and confession. These successive levels of participation, Gooren claims, are often followed by disaffiliation, a moving away from participation. Gooren (2010)

draws upon the works of H. Goffman (1959), R. Travisano (1970), and R. Greil (1977) and argues that identities become ‘spoiled’ under the influence of significant others.¹⁵ They look at conversion as a change of identity, a process involving the “complete destruction” of an older identity and the converts’ attempt to make a new identity central to almost all interactions.

From this overview of the scholarship it is obvious that conversion studies are beset by a number of critical problems, including the Christian framework of analysis and interpretation, the multitude of definitions of conversion, and the wide range of disciplinary approaches. The multitude of attempts to refine the understanding of the concept of conversion leads Rambo (2003, p.213) to claim that defining conversion is a vexing problem. Nonetheless, what becomes clear is the growing consensus among recent scholars that conversion is a process in which multiple elements are involved, such as agency (motivation, seekership, and commitment), pre-disposing factors, behavioural shifts, identity reconstruction, socialisation, adoption of values, and internalisation of worldviews.

Taking this growing consensus as my point of departure, in this dissertation I will demonstrate that the concept of conversion is applicable in an ISKCON context only if conversion is seen as an ongoing, gradual process of transformation, a process very different from Paul’s experience on the road of Damascus. Thus, entry into ISKCON is incongruous with the Christian framework in which conversion refers to a sudden radical change. In the case of ISKCON, conversion entails a process of slow drifting and gradual transformation. As such Reidhead and Reidhead’s (2003, pp.183-187) view that conversion is a redefining of one’s life in terms of “constant

¹⁵ Greil (1977 p.120) relates socialisation to the conversion process and links it with “spoiled identity” (Gooren, 2010, p.27).

conversion” sums up the reality of the transformation process typical of entry into ISKCON.

1.5. Ritual and Ritualisation

My dissertation shows that critically assessing the applicability of the term “conversion” to the journey individuals undertake when they enter ISKCON requires an in-depth examination of the role of ritual within that entry process. To analyse the role and influence of everyday ritual practice on the entry process it is useful to acquire a preliminary understanding of the stages of entry that lead individuals to undergo the initiation ritual. In the last century, A. Van Gennep and V. Turner have been concerned with stages of rites of passage, that is, rituals involving major transformations.

Van Gennep (1960 [1909]) notes that rituals create boundaries and often act in ways that transform an individual’s perception of time, space, and society. His most significant contribution to scholarship on ritual is his presentation of a tripartite scheme as a basis for explaining the stages of rites of passage. Rites of passage include separation rites such as funeral ceremonies, transition rites such as initiation, and incorporation rites such as marriages. Applying taxonomic principles, Van Gennep (1960, pp.156-166) distinguished three main stages associated with life-crisis ceremonies, or rites of passage: (1) separation, (2) liminality, and (3) incorporation. The first stage involves separation between the adherent and the world in which he or she normally lives. The participant becomes detached from former obligations and disassociates from former circles. The second stage represents the crucial part of the transformation that the ritual aims to achieve: adherents leave behind their former environment to enter the world prepared for them by the ritual. Within this liminal

stage participants often transgress common social/cultural norms. In the third stage, the incorporation stage, an adherent is given a new role. He or she now enters the new social group as a transformed person and is expected to behave differently. Van Gennepe's scheme offers a framework that is useful in studying entry processes. In Chapter Four, I use Van Gennepe's tripartite scheme to analyse the entry process into ISKCON.

V. Turner (1969), studying the Ndembu tribes of Zambia, applied Van Gennepe's tripartite schemes of separation, transition, and incorporation to the Ndembu hunting rituals. Turner further pursued the concept of threshold, the liminal position of participants in ritual (Van Gennepe's second stage). The neophyte, Turner claims, is a *liminal* entity who vacillates between two worlds. The newcomer, while already separated from his or her former environment, is not yet incorporated into the new group. Having no position in either sphere, neophytes tend to cultivate friendship and egalitarianism among themselves. This modality of social interaction, which evolves among neophytes based on their liminality, is what Turner (1969, p.95) calls *communitas*. Social bonding facilitates the connection between liminality and *communitas*. The growing sense of togetherness amongst group members contributes to a resolute discontinuity with the norms of behaviour common to their previous social environments and to accepting their new ways of life. Turner's analysis, which offers insights in how rituals move the participants from liminality to incorporation, is useful in studying entry into groups rooted in ritual. At the end of Chapter Four and the first part of Chapter Five, I discuss the transitional process leading up to incorporation into ISKCON.

C. Bell and P. Bourdieu have a different approach to the study of ritual. They are not so much concerned with the structure or stages in ritual but with issues of

power, an aspect of ritual somewhat neglected by Van Gennep and Turner. Bell in particular pays attention to the processes that differentiate ritual behaviour. Her approach is focused on disclosing the strategies by which ritual activities do what they do. These strategies are helpful for identifying the relationship between the ritual practice and the social relationships that these practices support. This, in turn, is useful while analysing the influence of ritual on individuals drifting into groups. My work demonstrates that examining the entry process into ISKCON goes hand in hand with understanding the dynamics of ritual in the context of social activity. Bell's analysis of ritual as a form of social control, a strategy embedded in various schemes of ritualisation, provides useful analytical tools for this exploration of processes of entry into (and socialization within) ISKCON. She argues that ritual is not a distinct type of activity; rather, any action or routine activity can be transformed into a ritual through a process of differentiation. Bell derived this idea of seeing ritual as an activity set apart from ordinary action by means of differentiation processes from scholars such as J. Z. Smith (2005, pp.26-43). Smith stresses that ritual makes distinctions by ascribing discriminatory values to the activity. Ritual, he claims, is an assertion of difference. It is "an ordinary activity placed within an extraordinary setting" (ibid, p.37). This setting apart of the activity is achieved by attributing to it a mode of attention. For instance, a ritual object or action "becomes sacred by having attention focused on it in a highly marked way" or "because it is used in a sacred place" (ibid, pp.33-35). Bell (1997, p.166) refers to this process as ritualisation, a process she describes as a strategic way of acting, or "a simple imperative to do something in such a way that the doing itself gives the act a special or privileged status." It is "a particular cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialised body and the environment it structures" (Bell, 1992, p.8). The three elements of Bell's interpretation of ritual action are (1) the strategies and powers it generates, (2) the social effects it produces and (3) the interaction between a

socialised body and the environment it creates (ibid, p.8). These factors are of crucial importance to my work in exploring ritualisation as a process of differentiation. What typifies the ritualisation process most is that it sets ritual action apart from other activities by applying rules of differentiation generated by culture-specific strategies. Bell explains the nature and mechanisms of these strategies as follows.

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. The ritual becomes a strategy of sacralisation, a means of communication or communion between the profane and the sacred (Bell, 1997, p.26). Actions are converted into ritual by means of a set of strategies, such as formalising actions, making them and their sequence invariant, legitimising them with reference to tradition, making them rule bound (or rule governed), infusing them with symbolic meaning, and locating them within particular schemes of opposition.

Ritualisation also entails generating schemes of opposition and hierarchy (ibid, pp.105-106). The sets of oppositions constitute a “strategic arena” in which ritualisation reinterprets and restructures the environment. Every interpretative endeavour to understand ritual assumes that a ritual activity encodes something. It is often the underlying oppositions that differentiate the ritual and construct meaning (ibid, p.51). 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 (ibid, pp.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.

Bell (1992, pp.169-176) discusses ritualisation as a form of social control, a cultural, strategic way of acting on belief, ideology, legitimation and power. Those in power or those who command ritual authority can control others. Both the endeavours of neophytes to acquire proficiency in ritual and the ritual mastery of the specialists lend ritual significant support to exert its power as a form of social control. Expertise in ritual relates to an internalisation of schemes of ritualisation by which one can reinterpret reality (Bell, 1992, p.141). Ritual mastery is concerned with knowledge that is “reproduced through practices made possible by the framing assumptions of that knowledge”. It offers a capacity for transforming the environment (ibid, pp.215-216). Ritual specialists, or lineages of experts, who represent authority and have the right to decide on the correctness of the ritual performance, dominate the strategies of ritualisation. They provide stability and control over the process of ritualisation and are usually expert in the oral and/or verbal codification of the practice. Generally their authority depends on their knowledge of the codes of practice and their own degree of steadiness and proficiency in ritual mastery (ibid, pp.130-138). The construction of power relationships takes place within the framework of a ritualised body (Bell, pp.197-204).

As a strategic social activity, ritualisation plays a critical role in constructing a social body. That body is structured by social practices, schemes, internalisation of values and strategies (ibid, pp.94-97). The ritualised social body, central to all strategies of ritualisation, becomes a means for creating and manipulating contrasts and hierarchies. It is implicated at every stage and is ritualised through rules about clothing, bodily decorations, cleanliness, purification, uttering mantras, fasting, hairstyle, gestures, etc. It is the ritualised social body that differentiates ritual action and sets it apart from any other kind of action or any other social bodies.

In summary, Bell focuses not on ritual as a separate type of activity, but on ritualisation as a strategy to differentiate a particular action from others, give it a privileged status, locate it within a system of meaning and value and within clearly defined relations of power and authority. Bell's theory, particularly her views on constructing ritualised social bodies through a process of differentiation that involves strategies of ritualisation, has provided a framework to my analysis of the patterns by which individuals enter ISKCON and assimilate its values and practices. Entry into ISKCON is a process that sets the entrant apart from other people, through the adoption of ritualisation strategies. Individuals entering ISKCON are set apart in a range of ways, all of which centre on ritual observance, e.g. with respect to ritually adopting new forms of clothing, bathing in the early morning, fasting on certain days, abiding by principles of purity, changing hairstyle, learning ritual gestures, following daily temple programmes and reading ISKCON's devotional texts. Incorporation into ISKCON entails movement along a path towards becoming a Brahmin through adherence to strategies involving (1) submission to schemes of opposition based on principles/polarities of purity and pollution, and (2) the practice of daily rituals. In ISKCON, ritual expertise is the hallmark of a Brahmin and becoming a Brahmin

requires submission to ISKCON's strategies of ritualisation which influence what one thinks and does and how one conducts one's life.

The bodies of ISKCON entrants become "ritualised bodies" through rules of differentiation, including strategies of formalisation, traditionalisation, hierarchisation and legitimation. Bell (1997, p.166) claims that those involved in constructing a ritualised body do not see themselves as actually constructing such events. They are more apt to perceive themselves as simply responding to circumstances. The characteristics of such forms of misrecognition are analyzed in Chapter Five. Setting individuals apart happens through strategic transformations of the body. Entrants become ritualised by strategies involving legitimation, traditionalisation, invariance and rule governance with reference to the teachings of Chaitanya. The Chaitanya tradition has formalised chanting God's names (i.e., "Hare", "Krishna" and "Rama") as a sacred, or transcendental, activity. Furthermore, the tradition emphasises the ritual offering of food to the deity, which is subsequently consumed as *prasadam* (consecrated food) by the devotees. The rituals relating to chanting and offering food, are believed to be invariant since the fifteenth century (the early days of Chaitanya); they are thus legitimised with reference to tradition. Additionally, ISKCON devotees are bound by strict rules concerning the body. They are to eat particular kinds of foods and avoid a range of other types of foods. And there are rules for bodily cleanliness and modes of dressing, which are discussed in later chapters. Such rules express certain shared values in ISKCON centred on sacrality and purification and their main concern is to avoid mundane influences believed to be contaminating and impure, as described in the tradition's scriptures. The ritualisation of the body is thus effected by means of elaborate schemes of opposition which differentiate between pure and impure.

Bell's theory is helpful in exploring ISKCON's entry and incorporation processes in a variety of ways. My study demonstrates that her work has particular relevance in the case of "conversion" to deeply ritual-centred groups (like ISKCON) that seek to transform the bodies and mind of entrants through ritual. My thesis helps to understand the whole entry process by which people participate and become absorbed into these ritualisation strategies. Such people become new persons after internalising and assimilating a whole system of meanings and values. The final goal of entry is to attain proficiency in ritual mastery and become a Brahmin. This process will be analysed and explained in the chapters to follow.

Bourdieu (1977, 1992, 1997), in keeping with Bell, 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, pp.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, p.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. In Chapter Four, I use his theory to explain how ritual practice enables ISKCON adherents to create an environment in which their worldviews are experienced as reality.

1.6. Scope and Methodology

My research is primarily based on the analysis of forty qualitative individual in-depth interviews with ISKCON entrants conducted between October 2011 and June 2012 in different locations in Western Europe.¹⁶ The first part of the interviewing was done on the basis of an interview schedule, a set of written questions. The second part recorded the interviewees’ narratives about their entry into ISKCON.

The interviews were held at selected ISKCON temples such that the interviewee profiles reflected the diversity of nationalities within ISKCON. I focused in particular on those from Christian and Hindu backgrounds. Knowing personally, as I do,¹⁷ the long-term residents of the ISKCON centres in Western Europe, I had a good idea of their age and the number of years they had been serving in ISKCON. As well as interviewing temple residents, I also interviewed a small number of ISKCON

¹⁶ I conducted these interviews with the permission of the Ethics Committee (July 2011).

¹⁷ A more detailed discussion of my insider status follows later in this section.

members who were non-residents occasionally visiting the temples where I conducted the interviews.

I conducted interviews in six European countries. I interviewed ten individuals in ISKCON temples in Belgium (Brussels), three in the Czech Republic (Prague), thirteen in England (Leicester), six in France (Paris), two in Switzerland (Zurich), and six in Germany (two in Abentheuer, one in Munich, and two in other places). Though six out of the forty interviewees are non-European by nationality,¹⁸ most of them had for many years been resident in Europe. The remaining thirty-four interviewees are European citizens. My selection of interviewees was mostly dependent on their availability during my visit. As a travelling monk I have been visiting these ISKCON sites over the last fifteen years, and I used my knowledge of these sites and their residents in developing this research project.

Twenty-six interviewees were from Christian backgrounds, eight were raised in British Hindu families, and six had no religious upbringing.¹⁹ Out of thirty-four interviewees, whose parents viewed themselves as belonging to a particular religion, only eight claimed to have engaged seriously with their parents' religion.²⁰ The other twenty-six perceived their previous religious practice to have been superficial. The sample of interviewees covered a wide range in terms of their age and the length of involvement with ISKCON.²¹ Twenty-nine interviewees were male, and eleven

¹⁸ My interviews included one Argentinian, one Australian, one Canadian, one Indian, one South-African, and one U.S. citizen.

¹⁹ The twenty-six interviewees from Christian backgrounds included one Calvinist, two adherents of the CoE, five Protestants, fifteen Roman Catholics, and three from Christian background without any institutional affiliation.

²⁰ The eight interviewees who engaged with their parent's religion are one adherent of the CoE, one Christian without institutional affiliation; five Roman Catholics and one Dutch Protestant.

²¹ Fifteen were between the ages of 25 and 39, nine between 40 and 49, and sixteen over the age of fifty. In addition, 6 interviewees had been involved with ISKCON for less than 9 years; seventeen had been with ISKCON between 10 and 19 years, and 17 had been ISKCON members for more than 20

female. This imbalance between male and female numbers was not intentional but was determined by the availability or otherwise of interviewees in the ISKCON temples. A problem I faced was that during my visit some female devotees were busy with household duties or were living too far away from the temple. Despite this challenge I was able to interview some of them via skype.

The first part of the interview was based on an interview schedule divided into five sections (see Appendix 1).²² The process of formation of the interview questions (explained in Appendix 2) involves topics such as identifying the point of initial contact with ISKCON, change of worldviews, and shift in beliefs and practices. During the second part of the interview I asked interviewees to share with me their journey of how they came to ISKCON.

At the beginning of each interview, I explained the aims of my research. I observed in two cases that the interviewee answered most questions with reference to their previous beliefs, which they viewed through their personal understanding of the meaning of “conversion”. These two interviews in particular have provided valuable detailed data in relation to ISKCON members’ perceptions of previous faith-based affiliations.

Rabinow’s statement that good informants are often “marginal” in their own society is noteworthy (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1977, pp.73-75). Two of my interviewees had chosen not to complete the entry process into ISKCON. They encountered various challenges which led them to decide that though they would

years. The average time span between the interviewees’ first contact with ISKCON and their first commitment was 2-3 years.

²² Davies (1998, p.34) maintains that ethnographic research often begins with a specified set of questions and general area of inquiry that allows a sharpening of the questions and a gradual development of a theoretical explanation. This is certainly the route my own research took.

remain connected with ISKCON they would not surrender completely to ISKCON authorities. These two cases offer particular insights in terms of obstacles individuals face in the course of the entry process.

Each time, after having conducted interviews (each lasting 1-2 hours), I transcribed the interviews based on recordings that I made with the informed consent of the interviewees. After transcription of all interviews I went over them repeatedly with the intention to trace broad patterns in the individual journeys into ISKCON. Looking at the processes they underwent, gradually the following major themes emerged from the data: identification of primary and subordinate schemes of ritualisation, blindness to self-projection of these schemes, stages of incorporation, socialisation, reframing of previous beliefs, and agency in particular in relation to a growing search of meaning, motivation, and commitment. I then started to further analyse the data in accordance with these key themes.

It became clear that many interviewees did not reject their previous beliefs but perceived them through the framework of ISKCON's philosophy. In addition, I observed that the ritual practice and related restrictions are building-blocks in a complex chain of primary and secondary schemes of ritualisation. Another crucial factor is that interviewees were actively engaged in a search for meaning, a seeking that initially focused on giving meaning to their life but later focused on understanding the effects of their daily ritual practice on their mental experience. Their motivations varied and many seemed to have made different levels of commitment to ISKCON at different points on their journey.

By going over the raw materials again and again, I started to identify parts (excerpts) of interviews clearly related to the identified themes. While categorising the

extracts per theme, I provided each with a code.²³ A further study of this data gave rise to a set of key features crucial for understanding the role of ritualisation with regard to entry into ISKCON. I discovered that ISKCON entrants are generally unaware of their absorption in, and projection (onto others) of, the schemes of ritualisation central to ISKCON. In addition, I noticed links between individuals' growing expertise in ritual practice and further incorporation into ISKCON. These themes are elaborated in the chapters that follow.

To conclude this section on methodology, I will devote the final paragraphs to a discussion of my approach to this study as an insider. Kim Knott (2005, p. 252) maintains that insiders to a tradition can be critical and analytical when writing about their own tradition. My own position in relation to ISKCON can best be described as that of a "critical insider". I came in contact with ISKCON in 1992 at the age of thirty-two. From my early childhood I have been a practising Roman Catholic. This combination of religious affiliation as a Christian, and as an ISKCON adherent, is something I will reflect on further later in this thesis. I have lived for twenty-three years among the people I have studied here. This has enabled longitudinal observation of ISKCON at different levels in the hierarchy. I have participated in, and observed at first hand, all details of everyday practice, and am well acquainted with the culture as an insider.

²³ The code system contains the follow data:

(1) An identification code of maximum three letters. This is a reference codes for internal use. The code does not refer to the legal name of the person. It is only meant to identify the individual for internal use. All names used in the dissertation are pseudonyms.

(2) Nationality

(3) Religious background

(4) Age

(5) Years of practice in ISKCON

Example: (ys/sp/rc/48/34); this code refers to "ys" who is Spanish, from Roman Catholic background, aged 48 and is serving since the age of 14, or for 34 years in ISKCON.

In my choice of method, I decided not to rely solely on my long-term participation-cum-observation in relation to ISKCON but rather, as suggested by C. Davies (1998, p.28), to allow for a greater variety of methodological approaches to address the contemporary reality of entry into ISKCON. The reason is that during my long-term involvement with ISKCON, my participation and observation were not specifically guided by a reflection on issues of “conversion” or processes of entry into ISKCON. The interviews conducted specifically for the purpose of this study were valuable because they were directed by the specific aims and objectives of this research project, and were complemented by my detailed engagement with primary and secondary literature on the subject. As Pye (2000, pp.67-68) suggests, a better term for “participant observation” might be “observant participation”, suggesting that one seeks to study the religious practice with a clear set of aims and objectives in mind and with the idea that the observations are done with the intention to provide a basis for further reflection. Such guided observations will more likely lead to a reflection that involves analysis and critique, and as such increase the scientific value of the undertaking.

Even so, just over twenty-three years of experience within ISKCON (almost half of ISKCON’s history) gives me certain advantages—it allows me to understand ISKCON members’ internal language and its deeper sense.

I have visited ISKCON centres all over Europe – and occasionally also in Russia, Canada, the United States, and India – for the last twenty years, and because I have served in a leadership capacity in ISKCON, I have very close knowledge of ISKCON’s socialisation processes, networking, leadership, as well as its practices and beliefs. This long-term experience, combined with my engagement in the postgraduate study of religion over the last eight years (first as an MA student, and now as a PhD

candidate), offers me the ability to understand ISKCON devotees at an intimate level. My experience allows me to offer a full picture and enables me to empathise with my interviewees and understand their experiences. Moreover, it permits me to ask relevant questions about dimensions of inner practice not accessible to outsiders.

My acquaintance with two discourse universes, one academic and the other comprising ISKCON insiders, has been advantageous. Inevitably, as far as the interview process was concerned, the insider-status provided unique opportunities and presented major challenges. With the majority of the interviewees, especially senior ISKCON adherents, I have some long-standing ties of affection as we have cooperated and together served ISKCON's mission on various occasions for a number of years. Most of them know me as a travelling preacher, a scholar in the tradition's philosophy, and as a student engaged in academic study. An effect of this is that, due to our close relationship, they easily and willingly shared their experiences, often in intimate detail. Their stories often contained ISKCON jargon, which only an insider can understand. They would probably not have disclosed their stories in the same way to an outsider. During the interviews, by placing myself in their position, I was able to ask additional questions to draw them out, and help them formulate their stories. The good relations between interviewee and interviewer inspired them to more openly reveal and communicate past experiences. Both parties, because of shared past engagements and experiences, were able to develop a profound understanding and knowledge of the ISKCON world.

My insider-status also presented challenges in some instances. I had previously conducted research on the role of women in ISKCON, as part of an MA research project. In that connection I interviewed ISKCON adherents from two communities, one in Mayapur (district Nadia, West-Bengal, India) and the other in Leicester (UK,

England). During an interview with a female Bengali devotee from Mayapur, I observed that she clearly held back, did not express any opinions, and interacted minimally. The reason for her restraint, which I came to know only later on, was that at time of that interview, I was serving as the Secretary for the ISKCON Global Governing Body; she had, of course, considered me as a representative of ISKCON's highest managerial authority. In October 2009, however, I resigned from all managerial duties in ISKCON and became engaged, full-time, in pastoral care, a service that helped to generate a spirit of trust and friendship with the interviewees of my present research.

These changes notwithstanding, a further factor caused some interviewees to be distrustful of me: this was my status as a scholar engaged in academic research. ISKCON does not generally recommend scholarly study as it is considered unhelpful for spiritual experience, believed to emerge through the medium of divine revelation. According to Vaishnava understanding, knowledge originating from any sources other than divine revelation, such as logical reasoning or sense perception, contributes little to, and can even hinder, realisation of one's "metaphysical self", the ultimate spiritual goal in ISKCON, which I explain in later sections of my thesis. As a result, some interviewees perceived me as an insider with an "outsider project". Three individuals in particular appeared distrustful and chose to answer my questions from the perspective of the Vaishnava teachings rather than express their own views. By being aware of these issues, I was able to evaluate the responses in appropriate ways and engage with them using the analytical-critical tools at my disposal.

As far as my personal experiences of entry into ISKCON are concerned, these have been very similar to those of Bartek, a Polish interviewee discussed later in the thesis, whose slow entry process into ISKCON has been characterized by a

transformation of views on his previous Roman Catholic beliefs. Bartek gradually came to perceive his previous beliefs through the framework of Chaitanya Vaishnava theology. Instead of sharing too extensively my own experiences, I will add my personal insights, but only when I see them as particularly relevant. By being as self-reflective as possible, I will try to reduce the danger of overemphasizing the *insider* perspective.

1.7. Ethical Issues in Research

Prior to embarking on my interviews, I applied for, and secured, ethical clearance for my project from the University's Research Ethics Committee. The importance of ethical considerations in research informed this project at every stage of data collection, analysis, and presentation. In connection with arranging interviews, in particular, a number of ethical issues were taken into account. The majority of the interview meetings were arranged by appointment. Interview sessions were almost all planned weeks ahead via e-mail or phone. During these pre-interview-contacts I explained the aims of my research and why I was undertaking it. Furthermore, at the beginning of each interview I repeated my research aims, communicated the key points described below, and asked if the interviewee remained willing to proceed with the interview.

First, I explained to each person that I would use an mp3-audio-recorder to record the interview for the purpose of transcribing the interview and that I would erase the digital audio recording after concluding the project. I sought the interviewees' consent for such recording; all of them obliged. Second, I informed them about the consequences of their participation in the research, in particular that I would use their testimonies for scholarly analysis and cite certain passages of their

interviews verbatim. Quotations, I assured them, would remain anonymous, and interviewees would be referred to by pseudo-names. I emphasised that despite the use of pseudonyms, individuals may still be identifiable (especially by those within the organisation) based on the content of their story or their answers on certain questions. Third, I explained that for my own data analysis, I would identify their responses by means of a case-identification-number, and not rely on their names. Fourth, I assured interviewees that I alone would have access to the sound recordings and to interview transcripts; I assured them that these would be stored in a secure place where I alone had access, and destroyed once the project was completed. I also assured participants that I would respect all requests for confidentiality. I have made sure at every stage of my research to observe these key ethical rules.

1.8. Note on the Use of Terms

Throughout my thesis I frequently use the words “West” and “Westerners”. These are problematic terms whose meanings require clarification. Used as a cultural designation, the term “Westerner” is imbued with a variety of meanings. Campbell (2007, pp.1-17) questions whether terms like “East” and “West” should be used in cultural analysis, or for academic inquiry. He points out that these words are loaded with ideological implications and are unsuitable for classifying world civilisations. To demonstrate that “Western” means “civilised”, some writers have often used binary typologies such as “East” and “West” to the detriment of those who were considered “non-Westerners”. During the Cold War, the media employed the terms to point to the confrontation of two superpowers, the USSR and the United States. At present, the term “Western” is often used in the context of the confrontation between jihadists and the “Western way of life.” Thus, the term has mostly been used to envisage the West

as a cultural entity with an identity that changes over time. Those who declare themselves anti-Western want to express their aversion to the so-called Western lifestyle, values, and beliefs.

Campbell links the West with *civilisation*, a term he defines as “the most general cultural grouping one can identify short of that comprised by the human race as a whole” (ibid, p. 5). In that sense the term “the West” is understood as a civilization that has its principal location in Europe or North America. My work too uses the term “West” in the “civilizational” sense that Campbell uses it, to refer to a broad cultural grouping. However, I am aware that using the term “Westerner” as a cultural term is highly problematic. The meaning of the term “West” has, as Campbell (2007, p.3) notes, recently changed so much that “the West is now no longer ‘the West’ as it has been constituted for most of its history”. His “Easternization thesis” acknowledges a shift of the West towards the Eastern holistic view of the divine as immanent and essentially impersonal. Whereas Campbell argues that the traditional Western cultural paradigm has been replaced by an “Eastern” one, critics like Dawson (2006, p.10) claim that there has been more a Westernization of Eastern themes than an Easternization of a Western paradigm. Similarly, Hamilton (2002, p.46) holds that Campbell’s “Easternization thesis” is a “stereotypical characterization of Eastern religions” and is insensitive to the differences between Eastern religions.²⁴

Mindful of the debate surrounding the terms “West” and “East”, I want to avoid the danger of “essentialising” and giving the impression of static and monolithic cultural entities, thus failing to do justice to the dynamism that marks both ‘East’ and ‘West’. I use the term “Westerner” in a “civilizational” sense mainly as a heuristic

²⁴ In addition, Beyer (2009, p.332) argues that Campbell’s Easternization thesis “puts too much analytical weight on the New Age movement as proof that Easternization has taken place”, and that “it is questionable whether the Western worldview can be reduced to Christianity and Marxism”.

device. In my thesis “Westerners” applies to individuals, mostly of Christian or secular backgrounds originally, whose ancestry is European and whose families have identified themselves as Europeans for many generations. They are persons who, prior to entering ISKCON, were socialised into aspects of Western mainstream culture and who found many of ISKCON’s central beliefs and practices new and unfamiliar.

My fieldwork focuses on the present mainstream culture prevalent in Western European countries such as Belgium, France, Germany, Spain, Switzerland and the U.K. These cultures, historically associated with Christianity, and, alongside this, with secular institutions and values in modernity, are based on cultural and ethical views very different than those adopted by ISKCON. The Hindu derived practices of ISKCON based on Brahmanical principles of purity and pollution, are different from, and in some ways even opposed, to the shared mainstream culture of the ‘West’. The strict adherence of ISKCON followers to the Brahminical principles of vegetarianism and their restraint of the use of alcohol, the beliefs in the principles of karma and rebirth are based on cultural dispositions, worldviews and moral principles derived from Hindu traditions. Therefore, the difference between ISKCON’s culture and the mainstream Western European culture causes conflicts, which often result in adherents’ alienation from previous social circles. Seventy-five percent of my interviewees are from Christian background, and eight are UK residents from Hindu religious/cultural backgrounds. The journey of entry into ISKCON experienced by adherents from Hindu upbringing, representing twenty-percent of the total interview sample, are different from those from Western European Christian cultural background. Comparing both groups of adherents will point to the importance of cultural differentiation especially with regards alienation of adherents from their previous social circles.

1.9. Overview of Chapters

The chapters to follow present the findings of this research, using some of the analytical insights provided by the theory of ritualisation, as applied to the analysis of “conversion” narratives. Chapter Two is a context-setting chapter. It looks at the 200-year legacy of Chaitanya Vaishnavism, which constitutes ISKCON’s theological foundation. It examines the revival of Chaitanya Vaishnavism in the Indian subcontinent in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and discusses the contributions of key individuals and their roles in the promotion of various forms of Vaishnava ritual practice, that have shaped belief and practice within ISKCON. This chapter also explores the history of the proselytising strategies deployed to bring individuals in contact with ISKCON, and to secure their commitment over time.

Chapter Three examines the central role of ritual practice within ISKCON, and the formal procedures for undergoing initiation at different levels of ISKCON’s organizational and social structure. After explaining ISKCON’s social structure the last section analyses two key interview accounts and identifies patterns of conversion.

Chapter Four discusses the centrality of ritual mastery in an individual’s progress through successive stages of initiation within ISKCON. It analyses the entry process and outlines three stages in the entrant’s passage: those of separation, transition, and incorporation. This chapter demonstrates that in an ISKCON context, “ritual action” is a form of social control that involves incorporation, social solidarity, alienation (from social contexts outside ISKCON), and integration (within ISKCON). Additionally, it examines how ritual practice is instrumental to the internalisation of beliefs and to the transformation of an individual’s identity.

Chapter Five discusses the process by which individuals come to accept ISKCON's ritual-centred values and practices, and incorporate these into their religious lives. It looks at interviewees' growing sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging. It identifies consecutive levels of commitment and an enduring second level of seekership. In addition, it demonstrates that entry into ISKCON often involves misrecognition of, and blindness to, the schemes of ritualisation deployed by the organisation.

Chapter Six, after discussing the historical development of conversion paradigms and the extant conversion models, identifies three elements of agency emerging from the interview data: seekership, social interaction, and commitment. I then discuss these elements within the framework of two extant conversion models and determine the extent to which the conversion models are, or are not, helpful in explaining entry into ISKCON. Concluding my analysis of the agency of individuals entering in ISKCON, I deliberate on whether my observations are in line with the "inculturation" or "social drift" models.

In Chapter Seven, my concluding chapter, I first explore whether the idea of *conversion* adequately explains the process of individuals entering ISKCON. I then propose a method for analysing the power of ritualisation relevant to entry into religious movements that are rooted in ritual. I conclude with a discussion on the scope for future research into the subject of ritualisation and its influence on conversion processes.

Chapter Two: The Revival of Chaitanya Vaishnavism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Proselytising Strategies and Ritual Practice

In this chapter I look at the strategies that led to the revival and eventual globalisation of Chaitanya Vaishnavism. The 200-year period of the tradition's revival and popularisation in the Indian subcontinent, set in motion by nineteenth and twentieth century followers of Chaitanya, established the context in which contemporary conversion to ISKCON is best understood. To introduce the tradition's legacy I will explore and discuss the contributions of three key individuals, Bhaktivinoda (1838-1914), Bhaktisiddhanta (1874-1937), and Bhaktivedanta (1896-1977), and their vital roles in establishing strategies for perpetuating various forms of Vaishnava (Vishnu-centred) ritual practice. I will also examine the innovations and strategies, which Bhaktivedanta added to the transformations set in motion by Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta in nineteenth century West Bengal. In particular, I will highlight aspects of Chaitanya's legacy to inform the process of entry into today's ISKCON.

It is important to gain a preliminary understanding of the tradition's roots before discussing the role of key individuals in the revival and expansion of Chaitanya Vaishnavism. After a brief elaboration on the sources used in this chapter, I will first provide a brief discussion of the life of Chaitanya as told in hagiographical sources.

2.1. A Note on Sources

There is a paucity of academic sources on the lives and activities of the key individuals who led the way to ISKCON's formation. A notable, and relatively recent, study of Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta is that authored by F. Sardella (2013).

Sardella is a researcher and the Director for the Forum for South Asia Studies for the Humanities and Social Sciences at Uppsala University in Sweden; he is also a senior Brahmin initiated member of ISKCON.²⁵ Sardella has extracted historical data on the life of Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta from Bengali materials written, reviewed and printed by these individuals themselves. He analyses his findings critically by comparing and situating them within the framework of the writings of other scholars concerned with the history of Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Sardella adopts a nonreductionistic dialogical approach, attempting to account for both Indian and Western perspectives. He examines the writings of Western and Indian scholars concerned with the nineteenth and early twentieth century history of Bengal, relating these to the products of his own research – the translations of original Bengali texts (e.g. magazines, letters, pamphlets, etc.) related to the life and work of Bhaktisiddhanta. The historical work done by Sardella has especially made a significant contribution by broadening the understanding of the development of Hinduism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the context of colonialism and the revival of Chaitanya Vaishnavism. It also examines Bhaktisiddhanta's childhood, education, and major influences, and highlights major historical findings relating to the life of Bhaktivinoda.

For the discussion of the life of Bhaktivedanta I have drawn largely from the work of T. K. Goswami (2012), who was one of the closest and most influential disciples of Bhaktivedanta. Before his untimely death at the age of fifty-six in 2002, Goswami was a student of religion and theology at the University of Cambridge. Goswami's personal extensive interactions with Bhaktivedanta, as well as his academic training at the University of Cambridge enabled him to describe the life of

²⁵ In 2010 he received the Donner Institute Prize for outstanding research in the field of Religious Studies at the Abo Akademi University in Finland for his research on Bhaktisiddhanta, which he conducted for his PhD research at the University of Oxford.

Bhaktivedanta and to illuminate his theological contribution. While in this chapter I use his work mainly to discuss Bhaktivedanta's life, in the next chapter I refer to many passages of Goswami's work that are helpful in analysing ISKCON's ritual practices and their underlying beliefs, and in describing their historical settings. It should be noted that Goswami's work, left incomplete at the time of his death, has been completed by Graham Schweig.²⁶ Schweig's efforts in completing Goswami's work and his own experience and scholarly writings on Chaitanya Vaishnava theology contribute to the richness of the final product.²⁷ It is noteworthy that Sardella and Goswami, both ISKCON insiders, have produced academic work on the key figures discussed in this chapter, thus challenging, by their work, the insider-practitioner/outsider-scholar dichotomy that has been extensively debated in academia, particularly in the field of Religious Studies. There are two sides to this debate. Knott (2005, p.252), looking at the insider/outsider dichotomy, notes that insiders to a tradition can be critical and analytical when writing about their own tradition. In contrast, Barker (1999, p.18) maintains that researchers generally benefit from positioning themselves as "observer-as-participant", or as non-member participant.

While mainly drawing from Sardella's research, I have also made a few references to the biographical and theologically-inspired work on Bhaktivinoda written by Shukavak (1999), a disciple of Bhaktivedanta and a PhD graduate in South Asian Studies, and the biography of Bhaktisiddhanta by Rupavilasa (1989), an ISKCON scholar. Their interest is not solely focused on history but also pays attention to theological issues. Regarding Bhaktivedanta, besides referring to the work of T. K.

²⁶ G. Schweig is a Harvard PhD graduate, and Professor of Religious Studies and Director of the Asian Studies Programme at Christopher Newport University in Virginia.

²⁷ Some of Schweig's recent works on Chaitanya Vaishnavism are: Schweig, 2007. *Bhagavad gita: The Beloved Lord's Secret Love Song*. New York: Harper San Francisco; Schweig, 2004. KRISHNA, The Intimate Deity. In: Bryant and Ekstrand, eds. 2004. *The Hare Krishna Movement, The Postcharismatic Fate of A Religious Transplant*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp.13-30.

Goswami (2012), I make multiple references to Bhaktivedanta's biography compiled by Satsvarupa Goswami (1980), an ISKCON swami.

For information about Chaitanya's life, there is no alternative than to rely on hagiography as the main source. A hagiography or a "sacred biography", as Tony Stewart (2010, p.11) notes, is a religiously-motivated work of fiction, as opposed to a non-sectarian "critical biography", which "does not seek to persuade along religious lines". The main hagiographic source on Chaitanya is the Bengali text *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, a work written by Krishnadasa Kaviraja, which according to T. Stewart (1994, p.230), was written and finalised between 1600 and 1612, or approximately seventy-five years after the demise of Chaitanya.²⁸ Krishnadasa Kaviraja, the author, was a disciple of Nityananda, whom the tradition considers to have been the closest associate of Chaitanya.

Stewart (2010, pp.6-8), looking at *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, claims that "it is clear from the outset that Chaitanya's biographical image was never simply the reported facts of his life; rather these biographies are concerned with the meaning of that life interpreted through the prism of their particular theology and expectation of the religious ideal as the author came to know it". Moreover, the Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition considers *Chaitanya Charitamrita* as the most authoritative hagiography, distinct from a number of earlier hagiographies.²⁹ Snell (1994, p.12-13) mentions a number of reasons for the distinctiveness of *Chaitanya Charitamrita*. First, the work

²⁸ *The other major biography of Chaitanya is the Chaitanya Bhagavata*, written by Vrindavana Das Thakura.

²⁹ The tradition recognises several earlier hagiographies of Chaitanya: a) Murari Gupta's *Krsna-chaitanya-charitamrta*, Sanskrit (1926 verses); b) Vrindavana Dasa's *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, Bengali (12,400 verse couplets); c) Kavikarnapura's *Krsna-chaitanya-charitamrta Mahakavya*, Sanskrit (1912 verses); d) Jayananda's *Chaitanya Mangala*, Bengali; d) Kavikarnapura's *Chaitanya-chandrodaya Nataka*, Sanskrit; e) Locana Dasa's *Chaitanya Mangala*, Bengali. These hagiographies are referred to throughout *Chaitanya Charitamrita*. Stewart (2010, p.9) observes that at least a dozen biographies were composed in Sanskrit and Bengali during the century following the demise of Chaitanya. At least seven have survived complete. This offers "a reading of more than hundred thousand verses of primary hagiographic narrative".

combines assumed biographical facts with a summation of doctrinal learning in such an authoritative way that any later written texts necessarily will have to be measured against the teachings explained in *Chaitanya Charitamrita*.³⁰ Second, it does not only explain the events in Chaitanya's life but also what they meant. Third, *Chaitanya Charitamrita* is considered to contain a full articulation of the Chaitanya Vaishnava theological system and a manual for devotional practice (*bhakti*). In addition, Stewart (1994, p.239) points out that sources of *Chaitanya Charitamrita* refer not only to earlier hagiographies but also to the teachings of Chaitanya's followers such as the *Bhaktirasamrita* (Nectar of Devotion), a manual on the practice of *bhakti* written by Rupa, the *Brihad Bhagavatamrita*, narratives written by Sanatana, and the *Bhagavata-sandarbha* by Jiva, a treatise on the *Bhagavata Purana*, a major *purana* establishing the position of Krishna as supreme.³¹

It is not my intention to construct a historically-accurate biography of Chaitanya but to examine the *Chaitanya Charitamrita* as a resource for later Vaishnavas, and to identify some of the crucial sources from which ISKCON's beliefs and practices are derived. Therefore, the fact that some of the sources of my work are hagiographical is not necessarily problematic since I am not approaching these sources as "facts" but rather for studying them as Vaishnava resources. The study of hagiographical narratives about Chaitanya's life also allows to discern continuities between the practices and views believed to be central to Chaitanya and his followers, the promotion of the ritual practice by the key individuals in the late 19th and early 20th century, and the current practices in ISKCON.

³⁰ Stewart (1994, p.234) points out that "Krishna Kaviraja imbeds in his narratives more than twelve hundred Sanskrit verses, which include four hundred derived from the *Bhagavata Purana*, and the remainder from over seventy of the theological works of the renounced followers of Chaitanya, other *puranas*, *natya-sastras*, *kavyas*, etc."

³¹ *Bhagavata Purana* is one of the major Puranas and is considered to be a major work of Krishnaism. For further reference: Matchett (2003): *The Puranas*.

During the last few decades many scholarly commentaries on Chaitanya have emerged. For instance, E. Dimock (1999) and T. Stewart have published a complete translation and commentary on *Chaitanya Charitamrita*. There is also a growing interest in Chaitanya by scholars associated with the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (OCHS). Ravi Gupta has written an anthology published by Ashgate Publishing, including articles on the Chaitanya Vaishnavism written by research fellows under the umbrella of the OCHS.³² I have used these resources too in my work.

T. Stewart (2010, p.8), in the introduction to his study of the grammar used in *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, concludes: “*Chaitanya Charitamrita* is the last of the hagiographies in Chaitanya that would prove to be the key to the organisation of the entire Chaitanya Vaishnava community”. In what follows, I provide a summary of the life of Chaitanya based on the narrative in the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*.

2.2. The Life of Chaitanya

According to *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, Chaitanya took birth as Nimai in the course of the month of February in the year 1486 in Navadvipa in present-day West Bengal. His father was Jagannatha Misra, a Brahmin, a member of the intellectual priestly class learned in scriptures associated with the Vedas, and his mother was Sacidevi, the daughter of Nilambara Chakravarti, a learned scholar. Chaitanya lived for forty-eight years. The first twenty-four years he remained in Navadvipa as a student and householder. His first wife was Laksmipriya who died at an early age. He then married Vishnupriya whom he abandoned when she was sixteen, when he, Chaitanya, at the age of twenty-four, accepted the life of a *sannyasi*, a world renouncer.

³² The title of the work is: *Chaitanya Vaishnava Philosophy, Tradition, Reason and Devotion*. Information on the authors and their articles is available on: <http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9781472425515>; last accessed on April 4, 2015.

After Chaitanya embraced the renouncer's life he is understood to have stayed in Jagannatha Puri (Orissa), where he remained for twenty-four years. During these years he travelled for six years continuously throughout India. While travelling, especially in South India, he preached in most practical ways the teachings of *Bhagavad Gita*, a seven hundred verse record of a conversation between Krishna and his disciple Arjuna from the *Bhisma Parva* of the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Bhagavata Purana* (a devotional text containing stories about the life of Krishna). Gaudiya (or Bengali) Vaishnavas consider Chaitanya as none other than Krishna, the divine incarnation who imparts the spiritual wisdom of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Yet it is believed that Chaitanya appeared to teach others about the position of Krishna as the primeval source and the cause of all causes.

Chaitanya Charitamrita, composed by Krishna Kaviraja Das Goswami in the late seventeenth century, is one of the main hagiographies on the life of Chaitanya. The work offers descriptions of incidents in his childhood portraying him as a naughty boy. At an early age he became very expert in Sanskrit grammar. When he reached the age of sixteen, he started his own village Sanskrit school. Nimai used to engage in debates with pundits (learned scholars), on *sastras* (scriptures associated with the Vedas), and defeat them. It was at this time that Nimai started to hold evening *kirtan*, congregational singing of the names of Krishna, at the house of Srivasa Pandit in Navadvipa (Mayapur).

Local Brahmins, envious of his popularity, complained to the Kazi, the local Muslim authority, who forbade the chanting. When Nimai heard the news, he organised a protest party. As a result, thousands of people chanting the names of

Krishna went on a protest march to the house of the Kazi. After this incident, Nimai started to preach more vigorously.

Upon his initiation as a renouncer, Nimai received the name Sri Krishna Chaitanya, before he left for Jagannatha Puri in Orissa. During the six years of his travelling throughout India, he visited Varanasi where he attracted thousands of followers. In the course of that visit Chaitanya converted *sannyasis*,³³ followers of Shankara's philosophy of non-dualism,³⁴ to Vaishnavism. He went also to Vrindavana (in present-day Uttar Pradesh), one of the places where, according to the tradition, Krishna had his earthly pastimes about five thousand years ago. By that time, Chaitanya had accepted many followers such as Nityananda, who was deputed to preach in Bengal; and Rupa and Sanatana Goswami, who he asked to excavate sites in Vrindavana – where, according to Vaishnava scriptures, Krishna performed his miraculous activities – and to write literature on devotional practice. Chaitanya, on his way to Jagannatha Puri, visited many places, which have been recorded in his hagiographies.

In Puri he converted Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, the chief pundit of the Jagannatha temple, one of the oldest temples in India where according to Chaitanya Vaishnavas Krishna is worshipped in the form of Jagannatha, “The Lord of the Universe”. During his extensive travels in South India Chaitanya met Ramananda Ray, the governor of Madras, and had conversations with him on high esoteric subject matters such as the selfless love of the *gopis* (cowherd girls who sported with Krishna in Vrindavana, according to the Bhagavata Purana). Each year, at the time of the

³³ A *sannyasi* is a renouncer who, after severing all worldly relationships and obligations, dedicates his life to the ultimate Hindu soteriological goal of *moksha* — liberation from *samsara* (the cycle of birth, death and rebirth).

³⁴ The philosophy of non-dualism or *advaita* posits that ultimate reality consists of infinite nondual consciousness (Sardella, 2013, p.199). Bhaktivedanta calls the position of non-dualism associated with Shankara (788-820) “impersonalism” (Goswami, 2012, p.1 nr.8, 22).

Jagannatha festival, usually held in June, all the devotees of Chaitanya from Bengal would come to Puri for the festival. During this festival the deity of Jagannatha, and his companions Balarama and Subhadra, are brought out of the temple and put on huge decorated chariots (*ratha*) pulled with long, strong ropes by thousands of people through the main street of Puri. The Ratha Yatra festival, “The Journey of the Chariots”, is a traditional Vaishnava festival held every year in Jagannatha Puri and attended by thousands of devotees. The huge deity forms of Jagannatha, Baladeva and Sudhadra are seated on towering large decorated canopied chariots, each supported on sixteen wheels. Thousands of people pull the chariots with ropes from the Jagannatha Temple to the Gundica Temple, where Jagannatha stays for seven days before returning (Bhaktivedanta, 2012a).

During this festival Chaitanya would sing the names of Krishna and dance before the chariot of Jagannatha in the company of thousands of his devotees, in ecstatic love for Krishna. The last eleven years of his stay he remained in Jagannatha Puri chanting the names of Krishna and exhibiting what the tradition understands to be “signs of transcendental ecstasy” (Bhaktivedanta, 2012i). Chaitanya left only one piece of writing composed of eight verses known as *Siksastaka* (eight instructions). It describes the inner experiences of Chaitanya’s chanting of the names of Krishna (Bhaktivedanta, 2012m). “Chaitanya taught that all devotion begins with the simple chanting of the names of God. The chanting of these names begins a process of transformation that will change the very nature of the devotee” (Stewart, 2010, p.4). Hence, the daily chanting of Krishna’s names is the main ritual practice for all Chaitanya followers.

After Chaitanya passed away in 1534, his movement continued to flourish for some time but it eventually weakened and almost disappeared. About twenty-five

percent of the Bengal population of the late nineteenth century practised Chaitanya Vaishnavism and accepted Chaitanya as the most recent divine manifestation of Krishna.³⁵ By the nineteenth century, practitioners of Chaitanya *bhakti*, or devotion to Chaitanya, were confined to the margins of society, at a time known as Britain's Imperial Century (1815-1914). Significant parts of the Indian subcontinent were under colonial rule, and this was a period of prosperity and national self-confidence for Britain.

A deeper understanding of Bhaktivinoda's and Bhaktisiddhanta's attempts to revive Chaitanya Vaishnavism in Bengal requires an insight into the perceptions and sensibilities prevalent in nineteenth century Bengal and its major city, Calcutta. The following section describes tensions prevalent in nineteenth century Bengal, explaining some of the major religious reforms that emerged as a reaction to the mainly British colonial and Christian missionary criticisms of Hindu beliefs and practices. What follows is a brief description of the Bengali city of Calcutta around the mid-nineteenth century, then one of the biggest, and most important cities of the British Empire, as well as a discussion of the growing opposition, in certain intellectual circles in Bengal and beyond, to Chaitanya Vaishnava theology and ritual practice.

2.3. A Picture of Nineteenth Century Bengal

In the second half of the nineteenth century the city of Calcutta, with a population of one million, was divided into two – a Western enclave and a native section. The

³⁵ These practitioners of Chaitanya *bhakti* appeared in three forms. Yet, none of them was appealing to the late 19th century Bengali intelligentsia. The first, and most popular form was considered to be sentimental, illiterate and morally weak. The second was a caste-oriented form, which was elitist and nepotistic. The third form was otherworldly mystical ascetic (Sardella, 2013, p.9).

Western section was marked by broad principal roads, four-storey houses in European style with terraces and balconies supported by Romanesque pillars surrounded by nearby well maintained parks illuminated with electric lights. The residents were people of the highest social ranks, English bureaucrats, missionaries, and businessmen. The boulevards were filled with carriages, oxcarts, and rickshaw drivers (Griffin, 1896, pp.64-76).

Three fourth of the population of Calcutta lived in the native portion of the city know as “Black Town”. Bannerjee (1989, p.129) notes that “with the decline of the village economy and the beginnings of industry in the nineteenth century Bengal, there was regular exodus of poorer men and women from the countryside to Calcutta. They settled down in different parts of the ‘Black Town’ (the areas in Calcutta inhabited by the indigenous population, as opposed to the ‘White Town’ which was the exclusive preserve of the Europeans).” Black Town residents lived in overcrowded crude mud or bamboo habitations in unpaved narrow streets. Within this section of the city at least twenty bazaars selling spices, Bengali sweets, ghee, rice and products from all over South Asia could be found. Along the narrow streets were temples of the goddess Kali, and festivals were held in honour of Jagannatha (Griffin, pp.66-69).

As W. Halbfass (1988, p.217) notes, the colonial period transformed Indian society by introducing new forms of organisation, administration, rationalisation, and technology.³⁶ New forms of education meant growing exposure to science and its methods of research and enquiry... along with this transformation came the rise of the *bhadralok*,³⁷ a young upper class of Bengalis who were attracted to secular and liberal

³⁶ It was not only the British colonists who transformed the Indian society. Jones (1989, p.4) points out that by the nineteenth century three layers of civilisation interacted: 1) indigenous Hindu-Buddhist civilisation; 2) Persio-Arabic civilisation; and 3) the British version of Western civilisation.

³⁷ Bhattacharya’s (2005) book is helpful in understanding the dynamics of the *bhadralok*. One of the chief concerns of her book is to determine the social location of the *bhadralok*. She looks at the

views, and had a strong commitment to education. Many of the *bhadralok* became trained and employed in civil and professional services after receiving formal education through the medium of English at mainly protestant missionary schools. These schools served a colonial agenda to form an educated class that could serve British interests. They sought to convince students of the superiority of Western Christian culture and of the irrationality of “Hindoo” beliefs (Sardella, 2013, p.5). Bhaktivinoda, whose biography is discussed in the next section, belonged to the class of the *bhadralok* and served as a deputy magistrate for the British administration. What follows is a description of the rise of certain elements that influenced Bhaktivinoda’s, and later Bhaktisiddhanta’s, approach and strategy to revive Chaitanya Vaishnavism. The first such element is the activity of Christian missionaries in Bengal; second, the religious reform movements initiated by prominent figures like Rammohun Roy (1774-1833) who embraced the philosophy of non-dualism (Advaita) in seeking to reform Hindu society,³⁸ and third, the universalisation of Advaita by Vivekananda – one of the first to speak about Hinduism on a world stage.

C. Hall (1992, p.243), concerned with missionary stories related to the 1830s and 1840s, observes: “Missionaries often preceded and prepared the ground for direct colonial incursion into a region and were a powerful force in defining the imperial project in the nineteenth century”. This “direct colonial incursion” was effected by early nineteenth century Christian missionaries who settled in Bengal and started to

nineteenth-century Bengal intelligentsia and analyses why the *bhadralok* developed a specific rhetoric of culture that has continued to form their identity to the present day.

³⁸ Rinehart (2004, p.56) points out that many Indian intellectuals responded to the British colonial criticism of Hinduism by seeking to reform particular aspects of India’s religious practices. Subsequently new religious movements within Hinduism, (as well as Islam and Sikhism) reformulated some of the beliefs and practices that had been criticised by both Westerners as well as Westernised Indians.

criticise Hindu customs, in particular the repression of women,³⁹ as being unethical. According to Geoffrey A. Oddie, Protestant missionaries, while having a love of mysticism in various Indic traditions, identified with three viewpoints: (1) a hatred of so-called idolatry; (2) a contempt for all forms of sexual expression; (3) a high regard for science and rationality (ibid, pp.40-41). Scottish and American missionaries adopted strategies to undermine Hindu beliefs. For instance, Alexander Duff (1806-1878), a Christian missionary of the Church of Scotland, verbally assaulted the Brahmins and intellectuals. Between 1793 and 1836, the missionaries were convinced that Western learning would create the desire for the Christian truth on which it was built. In addition, they attempted to show that the “truths” of Hinduism could be historically analysed to reveal that they were nothing more than products of the human imagination. Furthermore, Christian missionaries emphasized that Hindu gods were immoral, cruel, capricious, and unjust (Doctor, 1994, pp.105-106).

The result of these standpoints was a strong condemnation of, especially, Krishna’s nocturnal dance,⁴⁰ which had a religious significance out of the scope of their religions views. The early missionaries relied on Hindu pundits, who mainly belonged to the Brahmin class and whose explanations leaned towards non-dualistic perspectives in line with Shankara’s *advaita* rather than Vaishnavism. During the nineteenth century, despite resistance from Vaishnava and other quarters of society, non-dualism became to be accepted as the core of Hindu religious thought (Sardella, 2013, pp.35-46). Shankara presented Brahman as being without attributes such as personality and as such undermined theistic *bhakti* as his theory wiped out the

³⁹ On Christian missionary agendas and activities in India, see Cox (2002), Doctor (1994), Hall (1992), Gillen and Gosh (2007), and Sharma (1988).

⁴⁰ “Krishna’s nocturnal dance” refers to “Krishna’s rasa dance”, the *rasa-lila*, a story of the *Bhagavata Purana*, involving the cowherd maidens who exhibit the highest devotion to Krishna. “The story has been criticized as a subordination to ethics in relation to which human emotion and passion are engaged in worship in an apparently untamed or unethical fashion... an excessively emotional devotion to the erotic deity of Krishna” (Schweig, 2005, pp. 421-422).

distinction between the devotee (or *bhakta*) and his/her object of love, a personal God. Shankara's thesis is diametrically opposed to the Gaudiya Vaishnava position, which states that "Vishnu (or Krishna) is verily *saguna brahman* (the supreme being possessing personal attributes), which is considered to be prior to and higher than *nir-guna brahman* (the monistic or impersonal supreme spirit without any personal qualities)" (Schweig, 2004, p.16).

Prominent social reformers such as Rammohun Roy, proclaiming that Hindu culture could be made compatible with the progressive values of modern society, placed emphasis on non-dualism. Rammohun Roy was born in a traditional Brahmin family. He studied at a Muslim University in Patna, and became proficient in the study of Arabic, and Persian literature.⁴¹ The Sufi influence in particular engendered in him an aversion towards image worship. Rammohun Roy also studied Sanskrit in Varanasi, English, and even Hebrew and Greek with the aim of translating the Bible into Bengali (Flood, 1996, p.251). Larson (1995, pp.129-130) claims that Rammohun Roy was influenced by the Christian concept of God, but finally decided to remain a Hindu. To this end he focused on the ancient Vedic and Upanisadic idea of oneness of Brahman, which he understood to represent monotheism. In this way he attempted to "overcome" Hindu polytheism.

In 1815 Rammohun Roy wrote *Vedantasara*, in which he presents non-dualistic Vedanta as "the basis for social, political, and religious egalitarian views" (Robertson, 1999, pp.165-181). Non-dualistic (Advaita) Vedanta is based on Shankara's (788-820) interpretation that *Vedanta Sutra* points to Brahman as the

⁴¹ "Among interpreters of Indian tradition, Rammohun Roy holds a privileged place as the first nineteenth century Indian figure to publicly undertake a critical examination of Indian heritage, both in his stand against *sati* and also more generally in his attempts to reformulate Hinduism. There is an enormous body of literature on Rammohun as the father of the so-called 'Bengal Renaissance'" (Mani, 1989, pp.88-89). Some recent publications: Ghazi (2010), Salmond (2004), Upadhyaya (1990).

absolute basis of eternal divine consciousness.⁴² Non-dualism eliminates the distinction between the personality of both, God and the individual living being. Both are seen as Brahman, “a manifestation of the all-pervading Brahman” (Sardella, 2013, p.20). It is therefore not surprising that Rammohun Roy, valorising those aspects of Hindu traditions most compatible with his Westernised values, embraced Advaita Vedanta,⁴³ and rejected the practice of image worship and temple rituals.⁴⁴ He also argued against the system of caste and the practice of sati (Sardella, 2013, pp.20-24). With the aim of formalising their religious reform, Rammohun Roy founded the Brahma Sabha, a precursor of the Brahma Samaj, in Calcutta on 20 August 1828.

Rammohun Roy’s attempts of religious transformation and change go hand in hand with the crisis of the *bhadralok*, the Bengali middle class elite who had received an English education and were acquainted with European and Christian thought. The nineteenth century meant for them a time of search for religious, social, and cultural identity (ibid, p.26). The *bhadralok* sought to find a model of modernity that combined Western as well as indigenous values and culture. One of the ideas that circulated among the *bhadralok*, and that influenced the early twentieth century, is Vivekananda’s “universalist interpretation of non-dualistic Vedanta”, a development that had begun with Rammohun Roy’s revival of Advaita Vedanta philosophy (ibid, pp.25-34). Simultaneously, Western Indologists searching for Indian origins focused on early texts of the *Upanishads* and interpreted them from a non-dualistic

⁴² *Vedanta Sutra, or Brahma-sutra*, is a text attributed to Badarayana Vyasa, which scholars date as far back as the third century BCE. “Roy’s central vision is to restore and purify Hinduism by returning to the teachings of the Upanisads and the *Brahma-sutra*, which he sees as embodying a timeless wisdom, opposed to ‘idol worship’” (Flood, 1996, p.252).

⁴³ Rammohun Roy’s simultaneous embracing of Advaita and rejection of icon worship does not mean that present day adherents of the Advaita doctrine have no place for rituals. For instance, monks of the Ramakrishna Order engage in daily elaborate deity worship. Yet they interpret their worship in an Advaitic context, seeing it not as “an offering to some godhead, but as signifying the fundamental unity with the microcosm (the individual person) and the macrocosm of being” (Lipner, 1994b, p.293).

⁴⁴ Rammohun Roy (1832, p.viii) claims that “the Vedas represents rites and external worship addressed to the planets and elementary objects, or personified abstract notions, as well as the deified heroes, as intended for persons of mean capacity”.

perspective, concluding that all forms of Indic religion lead to the same impersonal goal of Brahman (ibid, p.34). They did this despite the fact that Indian religious traditions show a great variety of deities and that Vedanta has a number of alternative branches and interpretations. Moreover, missionaries such as William Ward at Serampore also suggested that Brahman, which he called the divine spirit, was the basis of all Hindu theology.

It was Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), who brought the vision into the twentieth century by presenting Advaita Vedanta as the core of Hindu thought before the Parliament of World Religions in 1893 in Chicago. He privileged *advaita* as the ultimate spiritual realisation, and downplayed popular expressions of devotional practice, in particular the dualistic strands of Hinduism, as a form of religiosity for the weak and ignorant. In addition, he glossed over the real internal complexity inherent to the multitude of Hindu traditions. Later on these views were consolidated by S. Radhakrishnan, a follower of Vivekananda, and by Mahatma Gandhi (Sardella, 2013, pp.36-54). G. Beckerlegge (2006, p.220) maintains that Vivekananda, by the 1890s accepted his views as “stern Vedantic”. By 1896, he identified “Vedantist” with “Hindu”, and neglected the debate that Advaita was only one strand in the Vedantic tradition. Paul Hacker (1995, p.30) moreover claims that Vivekananda, for the purpose of defence against Christianity, significantly altered the teachings of Shankara (788-200), the propounder of non-dualistic (Advaita) Vedanta. He maintains that:

“there is not the slightest indication in Shankara’s authentic works that he was the great champion of ‘Hindu unity’. ‘Hindu unity’ is something that lay completely outside of Shankara’s field of vision. Rather, Shankara attacked the non-Advaitic religions and philosophical systems of ‘Hinduism’ prevalent in his days; there is no trace of ‘consciousness of unity of Hinduism’ to be noticed in his works”.

The promotion of Advaita Vedanta as the unifying vision of Hinduism had now become an important instrument in unifying the sensibilities of the Hindu and Western worlds. It helped the *bhadraloka* to fight against the allegations of “Hindoo” irrationality and idolatry and “to approach European culture with a sense of Indic dignity and pride” (Sardella, 2013, p.43).

Not unimportant in this regard is the concurrent rise of another reform movement, the Arya Samaj, founded in Bombay in 1875 by Swami Dayananda Sarasvati (1824-1883). Dayananda was a Gujarati, born in Brahmin family of Shaivas, devotees who worship Shiva as the Supreme God (Wolpert, 2006, p.60). He built a vision of a reformed “purified” *arya dharma* (Wolpert, 2006, p.60). The development of his vision was based on the critique of Christian missions, established in India around 1813. These missions shared aversion to the idolatrous polytheism and caste system practiced by Hindu traditions and engaged in strong proselytising educational activities. In addition legal reforms were introduced by which the administration abolished certain Hindu customs. Dayananda accepted the Western criticism to the extent that they were related to image worship (‘idolatry’) and to the social (caste) system.⁴⁵ He too promoted the idea of an abstract (non-dualist) Absolute. In Dayananda’s view, selfish Brahmins were responsible for degenerating Hinduism by giving prevalence to idolatry, “blind faith” and “social evils” such as child marriage, abuse of the caste system, and the suppression of women. Only a purification of Hindu *dharma* achieved by returning to “a rational monotheism”, which he believed was promoted by the Vedic scriptures, would provide the solution (Wolpert, 2006, p.60). The Christian Missionary criticism of Hindu customs and the influence of Western modernisation thus gave rise to a trend of socio-religious reform which favoured non-

⁴⁵ A detailed examination of the rejection of image worship by Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati, is presented in Salmond’s (2004) work concerned with the question as to why some religious communities see the veneration of cult images as blasphemy and moral degradation and others as a means of communion with God.

dualist beliefs. Thus the rise of the *advaitic* doctrine diminished the importance of Chaitanya Vaishnavism, whose beliefs and ritual practice were diametrically opposed to those aligned with non-dualism.

When Bhaktivinoda (Kedarnath Datta, 1838-1914), a magistrate serving under the British rule, and his son Bhaktisiddhanta (1874-1937), discovered what are believed to be the original medieval writings of Chaitanya and his most significant followers Rupa Goswami, Sanatana Goswami and Jiva Goswami, they concluded that the contemporary forms of Chaitanya devotionism were a misrepresentation or distortion of a “highly austere, philosophical, moral, disciplined and egalitarian tradition” (Sardella, 2013, pp.9-10). Despite considerable opposition, Bhaktivinoda, Bhaktisiddhanta, and Bhaktivedanta sought to revive the Chaitanya tradition and expand it into a global phenomenon. They sought to stem the tide of non-dualist philosophies opposed image worship and other forms of ritual practice. Their aim was to develop strategies for the revival of the Chaitanya devotionalist tradition and thereby resist these opposing forces. The following sections look at the respective roles of each of these figures in this process of revival and growth.

2.4. Kedarnath Datta Bhaktivinoda (1838-1914)

Bhaktivinoda was born as Kedarnath Datta on September 2, 1838 in Ula, a village situated about hundred kilometres north of Calcutta. In 1852, circumstances forced him to move to Calcutta where he lived in the home of his maternal uncle until 1858. It was during that time that Kedarnath, in search for education and employment, entered the social circles of the *bhadralok* and encountered the complex world of

colonial Bengal. In the course of his study at the Hindu Charitable Institution,⁴⁶ he became friends with Satyendranath and Gajendranath Tagore and Keshab Chandra Sen, the future leaders of the Brahmo Samaj.⁴⁷

Due to his close association and relationship with the Tagores, he became acquainted with the rationalism of the Brahmo Samaj. Many of the *bhadralok*, including Bhaktivinoda and Bankim Chandra,⁴⁸ were seeking to redefine and refine Hindu culture (Shukhavak, 1999, p.28).⁴⁹ Kedarnath started occasionally writing articles for the *Hindu Intelligencer*, and sometimes would hold lectures on religion at the British Indian Society. During that time he also engaged in studying the Bible under the direction of Reverend Charles Dall.⁵⁰ By reading works on Christian theologians, he developed an appreciation for Jesus Christ and for Christian beliefs. All these experiences made Kedarnath reflect upon the role of theism. After working in Bengal and Orissa as a teacher, he became a deputy magistrate and entered the higher ranks of colonial service in 1866, after passing through a series of rigorous examinations. By the time of his retirement in 1894 he had been relocated twenty-five times, serving in each location for a period of a few years as deputy magistrate entrusted with various civil service responsibilities.

In 1868, Kedarnath was transferred to Dinajpur, an area mainly inhabited by followers of the Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition. It was at that time that he began to

⁴⁶ Sardella (2013, p.58) defines the Hindu Charitable Institution as a *bhadralok* project offering Hindu students an alternative to Christian missionary education.

⁴⁷ Satyendranath was an active member of the Brahmo Samaj and Gajendranath was Bhaktivinoda's friend who went on to become the first Indian barrister (Bhaktivinoda, 1916, p.68).

⁴⁸ Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) was an Indian writer and the author of "Vande Mataram", a song which became the hymn of Hindu India during its struggle for independence (Sardella, 2013, p.7).

⁴⁹ Shukavak (1999, p.89) points out that whereas Bhaktivinoda attempted to redefine Hindu culture in terms of continuity with the past, Bankim Chandra wanted to break with the past.

⁵⁰ Reverend Charles Dall was a missionary who was sent to Calcutta by the American Unitarian Association of Boston to explore the possibility of cooperation with the Brahmo Samaj (Sardella, 2013, p.60).

study Chaitanya Vaishnavism. From 1869 to 1874 Kedarnath served as a deputy magistrate in Jagannatha Puri where he made an in-depth study of Vaishnava literature with the help of local pundits, Brahmins expert in Sanskrit and Vaishnava scriptures. Kedarnath was also overseeing the affairs of the Jagannath Temple. He regulated the Vaishnava ritual practice of deity worship to a point of extreme precision. It was during that period, in 1874, that his son Bimal Prasad (Bhaktisiddhanta) was born.

Through his study, Vaishnava *bhakti* emerged as the focal point of his life. He started to write books on various aspects of *bhakti* in Bengali, English, and Sanskrit.⁵¹ Bhaktivinoda became initiated by Bipin Bihari Goswami into the Vaishnava preceptorial descent from Nityananda, whom the tradition considers to be the principal associate of Chaitanya (Bhaktivedanta, 2012a).⁵² He wrote commentaries on many Vaishnava scriptures such as on *Chaitanya Caritamrita*. In 1886, Kedarnath received the title of “Bhaktivinoda” in recognition of his learning (Sardella, 2013, pp.56-63). Bhaktivinoda was known for being critical of heredity as the basis for brahminical (priestly) status and eligibility for worshipping the deity. He defended the idea that those born of non-Brahmin families could develop priestly qualities required for worshipping the deity, and claimed that the qualities of a Vaishnava surpasses those of a Brahmin.⁵³ Bhaktivedanta later used Bhaktivinoda’s argumentation to justify initiating Western disciples as Brahmins (Goswami, 2012, p.193).

⁵¹ Bankim Chandra Chatterji also acknowledged Bhaktivinoda’s contribution in his own commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*: “Sri *Bhabu* Kedarnatha Datta, a Vaishnava and *pandit* of the highest order, often supplied in his translation the gist of Visvanatha Chakravartin’s commentary” (Sardella, 2013, p.62).

⁵² Bipin Bihari Goswami, Bhaktivinoda’s initiating (*diksha*) guru, was a caste (hereditary) goswami from Baghnapura who belonged to the line of Nityananda (Sardella, 2013, pp.62-65-96). After receiving *diksha* Bhaktivinoda received inspiration and direction from Jagannatha Dasa Babaji, whom he accepted as his main instructing (*siksha*) guru. Jagannatha Dasa Babaji was a disciple of Visvanath Chakravarti who belonged to the preceptorial descent coming down from Chaitanya.

⁵³ Bhaktivedanta’s translation of *Bhagavad Gita* verse 18.54 lists the following qualities of a Brahmin: “Peacefulness, self-control, austerity, purity, tolerance, honesty, knowledge, wisdom and religiousness – these are the natural qualities by which Brahmins work” (Bhaktivedanta, 2012c).

Bhaktivinoda's role in the revival of the Chaitanya tradition and the emergence of its proselytising spirit is that of a founder who laid down a number of principles. He developed strategies, which later on were adopted and further developed by Bhaktisiddhanta, Bhaktivedanta and ISKCON. A pillar sustaining these strategies was the printing and distribution of Vaishnava literature, not only in Bengali but also in English. Because of Bhaktivinoda's familiarity with the British colonial culture and with expressions of Christian faith in English, he knew how to present Chaitanya Vaishnavism in a way understandable to the English-speaking world. He also showed how traditional religious faith might legitimately be expressed in terms of the nineteenth century Bengali culture (Shukavak, 1999, pp.187-202). Because of his acquaintance with the tenets and practice of Chaitanya Vaishnavism and his experience with the British colonial world, Bhaktivinoda developed the ability to present the Chaitanya Vaishnava beliefs and practices in a language that was appealing to the Western world.

On August 20, 1896, Bhaktivinoda published a sixty-four-page book, *Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu: His Life and Precepts*, a work containing a short collection of Sanskrit verses summarising the teachings of Chaitanya (Rupavilasa, 1989, p.250). He sent several copies to universities abroad. It reached the bookshelves of McGill University in Montreal, the University of Sydney in Australia, and the Royal Asiatic Society in London (Goswami, 2012, p.34).

Besides introducing the printing and distribution of books, Bhaktivinoda was also concerned with setting up of an international organisation to support the spreading of the teachings. In 1885 in Calcutta, Bhaktivinoda founded the *Visva Vaishnava Raja Sabha* or the Royal World Vaishnava Association, and held regular meetings of the association. During that same year he also founded a research centre,

The Vaishnava Depository, a library intended for the preservation of Chaitanya Vaishnava literature. This included the installation of a printing press, which he used to publish *Sajjanatosani*, a magazine containing news of Bhaktivinoda's missionary activities, as well as to publish his songs, and his writings on theology, Vaishnava history, and contemporary religious issues (Sardella, 2013, p.65). Jones (1989, p.1), examining socio-religious reform movements in British India, states that "aggressive proselytism became a norm among sects and religions with new and refurbished forms of action, ranging from public debates on the meaning of scriptural sources to the use of printing presses to produce books, journals, and a multitude of pamphlets." This explains why Bhaktivinoda was an avid user of the printing press. His use of a printing press for proselytising purposes was in line with contemporary practices.

Another strategy aimed at presenting Chaitanya Vaishnavism in an attractive way to an international audience was Bhaktivinoda's attempt to build bridges between Vaishnava and Judeo-Christian traditions. He did not hesitate to use Christian expressions such as "universal fraternity", "cultivation of the spirit", or "church" to communicate the teachings to the West (Sardella, 2013, pp.94-97), and often identified Islam and Christianity as "vaishnava-type" religions because they recognised "a Supreme Godhead" as the highest principle (Shukavak, 1999, p.206). In this way he was seeking to adapt Chaitanya Vaishnava culture to the modern world (ibid, p.28).

Besides the inauguration of a tradition of printing and distribution of books, Bhaktivinoda also set up easy routes for introducing individuals to the practice of Vaishnava rituals. While scholarly work (Rupavilas, 1989; Shukavak, 1999; Gowami, 2012) on Bhaktivinoda generally gives more attention to history and beliefs than to ritual practice, multiple hints can be found indicating the importance Bhaktivinoda

gave to the education of individuals in daily ritual practice as an important method of spreading Chaitanya Vaishnavism. Bhaktivinoda's emphasis on ritual observance appears from an anecdote mentioned in hagiographic literature. It is the tradition in Vaishnava families, as will be explained in the next chapter, that all prepared foodstuffs are first offered ritually to an image of Krishna. After the completion of the offering ritual before the deity or image of Krishna, the food preparations can then be eaten with thankfulness or "honoured" as *prasadam*, "sanctified food". Hence, one day Bimala Prasad (Bhaktisiddhanta) at a young age took a mango meant to be offered to the deity. Seeing this, Bhaktivinoda mildly rebuked him, and explained that it was unsuitable to eat food that had not been offered first to the deity. It is said that after this incident Bimala Prasad, feeling himself an offender, vowed never to eat mangos again during his lifetime.⁵⁴

In another instance, in 1881 when Bimala was attending the seventh-grade, Bhaktivinoda gave him prayer beads made of the wood of a *tulasi* (Holy Basil) plant, and encouraged him to take interest in *bhakti* by maintaining a daily practice of mantra-meditation. Bhaktisiddhanta used this set of beads for meditation purposes throughout his life (Sardella, 2013, p.64). Chanting and meditating on Krishna's names with rosary beads made of *tulasi* is also a daily practice of ISKCON devotees.

Bhaktivinoda used to give regular lectures on Vaishnava scriptures in his house, and Gaura Kisora dasa Babaji, a highly esteemed Vaishnava ascetic renunciant and future guru of Bhaktisiddhanta, would regularly attend them (Sardella, 2013, p.73). Such lectures would be preceded by the chanting of Krishna's name and followed by the distribution of *prasadam*, sacred food offered to the deity. It

⁵⁴ According to Sardella (2013, p.63) this event is narrated in Sundarananda Vidyavinoda, *Sarasvati Jayasri, Sri Purva* (unpublished), pp.77-78.

combined three essential Vaishnava rituals, which are the chanting of the names of Krishna, the daily hearing of Vaishnava scriptures from a guru, and the offering of food to an image of Krishna. These rituals, which were part of Bhaktivinoda's daily practice, will be explained in more detail in the next chapter in the context of present-day ISKCON.

While travelling from village to village, during his work for the British Raj, Bhaktivinoda developed a network of *nama-hatta* (which literally means: "the holy name right in your home"). This was a scheme for establishing small local preaching centres. He would inspire local Vaishnava practitioners to hold regular gatherings in their houses inviting people to chant Krishna's holy names, hear the Vaishnava scriptures, and receive *prasadam*. This was one of Bhaktivinoda's main strategies to spread Chaitanya Vaishnavism from village to village; his dream was to establish a global Vaishnava community (ibid, pp.78-79). Bhaktivinoda's son, Bimal Prasad, as discussed in the next section, assisted Bhaktivinoda in establishing strategies for the spreading of Chaitanya Vaishnava ritual practice.

2.5. Bimal Prasad Bhaktisiddhanta (1874-1937)

In 1883, when Bhaktivinoda was appointed deputy magistrate in Serampore, north of Calcutta, Bimal Prasad was registered at a Bengali medium school. Four years later, in 1887, Bimal Prasad joined the Calcutta Metropolitan Institution where he received a modern education provided for the *bhadralok* youth. He developed an interest in mathematics and studied astronomy with pundits Mahesh Chandra Cudamani and Sundara Lala, who, in 1889, awarded him the title "Siddhanta Sarasvati". After passing a demanding entrance examination he entered the Sanskrit College and became proficient in Sanskrit, mathematics, Indian philosophy and ancient history.

While studying at the college, he spent time reading Chaitanya Vaishnava literature (Sardella, 2013, pp.65-68).

In 1891, when Bimal Prasad was seventeen he introduced his own tutorials in astronomy, published two astronomy periodicals. Four years later, in 1895, with the aim to collect finances for establishing a school for astronomy,⁵⁵ he accepted a position at the royal court of the Maharaja of Tripura.⁵⁶ The Maharaja, a supporter of Bhaktivinoda, employed Bimal Prasad and engaged him in editing a history of the royal dynasty and tutoring one of the princely sons of Maharaja Radha Kishor (1857-1909), a task Bimal Prasad performed for a number of years. During that period around the turn of the century, he became seriously dedicated to a life of austerity and celibacy (ibid, pp.69-72).

Around that time he came in contact with Gaura Kishora das Babaji, a highly regarded Vaishnava ascetic and mystic who, as mentioned earlier, sometimes visited the home of Bhaktivinoda to attend Bhaktivinoda's lectures. Gaura Kishora's guru was Bhagavata Dasa Babaji, a disciple of Jagannath das Babaji, a guru in the Chaitanya Vaishnava preceptorial line (*sampradaya*). Bimal Prasad became deeply impressed by Gaura Kishora's humility, simplicity, and spiritual absorption. Gaura Kishora, at the age of twenty-nine, had accepted initiation as a *babaji*, a strict, austere celibate renouncer of the world dedicating his life to the spiritual meditation of chanting Krishna's sacred names. While Bimal Prasad recognised both Bhaktivinoda and Gaura Kishora as fully realised Vaishnavas, he viewed them as representing two different approaches. Bhaktivinoda represented the path of the layman and Gaura Kishora represented the path of the ascetic.

⁵⁵ In 1891 Sarasvati introduced his own tutorials in astronomy; and in 1897 he used his family home to establish the Sarasvata Chatuspati, a school of astronomy (Sardella, 2013, p.69).

⁵⁶ Tripura is one of India's easternmost provinces.

Following regular meetings with Gaura Kishora, Bimal Prasad started to identify himself very deeply as a *Chaitanya bhakta*, a devotee of Chaitanya. It was at that time that he changed his name to “Bhaktisiddhanta”. Yet soon after, Sarasvati received initiation from Gaura Kishora and was given the initiation name Varsabhanavi Devi Daitya Das, a name he kept until he formally embraced *sannyasa*. After having received initiation from Gaura Kishora, Bhaktisiddhanta moved from Calcutta to the countryside of rural Navadvipa where he began to live as a *brahmacari*, a celibate student. For a number of years he spent time visiting various religious centres in Bengal and South India, and started to collect materials for the publication of a Vaishnava encyclopaedia.⁵⁷ During that period, Bhaktisiddhanta lived very austere and dedicated his life to study, writing and contemplation. He vowed to complete the ritual practice of chanting one billion times the names of Krishna, a vow that took him ten years to complete (ibid, pp.73-81).⁵⁸ Bhaktisiddhanta’s vow of chanting one billion names of Krishna and later on, his acceptance of his disciple’s request, and his vow to chant at least hundred thousand names of Krishna every day,⁵⁹ a practice that takes the proficient chanter eight hours, demonstrates his emphasis on the meditation rite of chanting God’s names.

In many respects Bhaktisiddhanta continued the work his father had started. However, he also introduced some major innovations, which had a significant bearing on how the movement took shape during and after his lifetime. Among his major contributions are his emphasis on the publication and distribution of writings to spread

⁵⁷ The four first volumes of the encyclopedia were published under the title *Vaishnava manjusa* (Sardella, 2013, p.81).

⁵⁸ The chanting of Krishna’s name a billion times equals the chanting of 62,500,000 times the Hare Krishna mantra, a mantra consisting of sixteen names of Krishna: Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare.

⁵⁹ Hundred thousand names of Krishna equal the chanting of sixty-four rounds of the Hare Krishna mantra on a rosary counting hundred-and-eight beads. The chanting of one complete mantra consists of sixteen names of Krishna.

awareness about Chaitanya Vaishnavism; his organisational initiatives and setting up a dedicated Gaudiya Math; and his vision and strategy to spread the Gaudiya institution beyond India. His redefinition of what it means to be a Brahmin (which had implications for attaining brahminhood within his institution) and the innovations he introduced for initiating monks into renunciation (*sannyasa*) are considered his most unorthodox initiatives. They will be discussed in some detail in the following paragraphs.

Bhaktisiddhanta had been trained at an early age in the writing, printing and distributing of Chaitanya Vaishnava literature. After Bhaktivinoda started, around 1883, to print the magazine *Sajjanatosani*, which contained news of his missionary activities, he engaged Bhaktisiddhanta with the task of proofreading the magazine. Bhaktisiddhanta, in line with Bhaktivinoda, stressed the importance of printing Vaishnava literature and distributing it on a large scale.⁶⁰ He considered inquisitiveness and reason, in particular facilitated by the study of Vaishnava scriptures, important for the healthy internalisation of *bhakti* through its ritualistic practice (ibid, p.117).

In 1915, the year after his father's demise, Bhaktisiddhanta moved the printing press from Calcutta to Krishnanagar and continued to publish *Sajjanatosani*. In June of that same year, only a few months before the passing away of Gaura Kishora, he completed the writing of *Chaitanya Caritamrita*, Chaitanya's major hagiography (Sardella, 2013, p.88). From 1920 to 1923 Bhaktisiddhanta engaged in intense literary activity and published books such as the *Bhagavata Purana*, a work focused on Krishna as the Supreme Godhead, and the *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, the second most

⁶⁰ Goswami (2012, p.111) points out that Bhaktisiddhanta established four presses, from which he revised and published his father's writings, and his own publications in the form of a Bengali daily newspaper, a fortnightly journal in Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, Hindi and English.

important hagiography of Chaitanya written by Vrindavan das Thakura. These are all seminal works for followers of ISKCON today.

An important development during Bhaktisiddhantha's lifetime had to do with his pioneering role in shaping highly unorthodox views about the meaning of Brahminhood, or the status of the Brahmin, traditionally considered the highest caste in Hindu society where status was determined by heredity alone. During the month of August 1911, Bhaktivinoda was invited to speak at a large meeting in Balighai Uddhavapur, to discuss two issues: "first, whether or not it was permissible for non-hereditary Brahmins to worship Vishnu in the form of a sacred stone known as *salagrama sila*; and second, whether or not it was permissible for them to act as gurus and initiate members of other castes" (Sardella, 2013, p.82). Because Bhaktivinoda was ill, he requested Bhaktisiddhanta to go and address the meeting.

Bhaktisiddhanta began his speech by praising the Brahmins; he then cited the sacred texts to argue that Brahmins in this age of Kali (*kali-yuga*) are no longer pure, and no better than *sudras* or the labourer class. He went on to quote Vaishnava texts claiming that in ancient times, members of all castes were initiated as Brahmins provided that they were of suitable behaviour and character. Bhaktisiddhanta asserted that the markers of a Brahmin were not birth into a Brahmin family, but control of the mind and senses, austerity, purity, satisfaction, patience, honesty, knowledge, compassion, truthfulness and surrender unto the infallible" (ibid, p.84). His presentation caused agitation among the pundits, marking the beginning of a lifelong confrontation between Bhaktisiddhanta and Navadvipa's hereditary Brahmins. The long lasting conflict between him and the hereditary Brahmins deepened when Bhaktisiddhanta started to award *brahminic* initiation to members of the so-called

lower castes. Bhaktisiddhanta was very critical of heredity as the basis for brahminical status.⁶¹

The conflict flared up again fourteen years later when on January 25, 1925, Bhaktisiddhanta started a one-month tour of sacred places around Navadvipa-Mayapur, the birth-site of Chaitanya. This caused a new confrontation with the orthodox Brahmin community who remembered his speech of 1911 against *brahminic* hereditary privileges. In his daily discourses, Bhaktisiddhanta would preach severely against non-dualistic doctrines and the privileges of hereditary Brahmins. During this pilgrimage tour, which was attended by more than two hundred, the pilgrims were attacked by a gang of ruffians and pelted with bricks and stones. Bhaktisiddhanta, however, even after several attempts on his life,⁶² continued preaching uncompromisingly against what he viewed as hypocrisy and falsehood (ibid, 98-100).

Shortly after the demise of Bhaktivinoda (1914) and Gaura Kisora (1915), Bhaktisiddhanta invested the order of *sannyasa* upon himself and dressed in saffron. This was an extraordinary step, not least because his *sannyasa* initiation was self-conferred. The ceremony was held before a picture of Gaura Kishora, a symbolic representation believed to authorise his initiation into the renunciatory order of the Chaitanya Vaishnava *sampradaya*. From that moment Bhaktisiddhanta became known as Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati. The rite was unusual also because the customary dress of Vaishnava ascetics, such as the *babajis*, had always been white. Sardella (2013, p.90) comments: “In Bengal, saffron was mostly identified with the colours of the

⁶¹ Goswami (2012, p.192) draws attention to the fact that Bhaktisiddhanta’s position dramatically differed from what was observed during the time of Chaitanya, who himself respected caste restrictions. Even Muslim followers of Chaitanya, as well as Rupa and Sanatana, who had been expelled by the Brahmin community, would not enter the temple of Jagannatha in Puri.

⁶² Jones (1989, p.1) mentions in his work on the history of socio-religious movements in British India that at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century religious conflict was implicit in the competition for converts, and explicit in assassinations and riots. In the light of such tensions, an attempt to murder was not an unusual occurrence.

non-dualistic Shankara line, and not with those of the Vaishnavas”. During Bhaktisiddhanta’s earlier visits to South India, he had learned about the Vaishnava *tridanda sannyasa*, or the triple staff renounced order, when he visited the Ramanuja ashrams, places of retreat used by adherents of the Ramanuja Vaishnava *sampradaya*.⁶³ The South Indian *Ramanuja* Vaishnava tradition was famous for its *sannyasa* order (Sardella, 2013, p.90). Bhaktisiddhanta’s acceptance of *sannyasa* brought an important innovation in the newly revived Chaitanya tradition. It led Bhaktisiddhanta to offer *sannyasa* to some of his most qualified senior disciples, a tradition later on continued by Bhaktivedanta and ISKCON.

In 1920, Bhaktisiddhanta re-established the *Visva Vaisnava Raja Sabha*, and after the passing away of his mother on June 23, used Bhaktivinoda’s ashram, “Bhaktivinoda Asana”, as a centre of the institution, which became known as the “Sri Gaudiya Math”. The *Visva Vaisnava Raja Sabha* came later on to be known as the “Gaudiya Mission”, and Bhaktisiddhanta’s monastic centres came to be known as “Gaudiya Math” (Sardella, 2013, p.18).

During the following years he attracted many followers and accepted numerous disciples. During that same period, Bhaktisiddhanta gave some of his disciples *sannyasa* initiation and engaged them in preaching work in India, which led to the rapid expansion of the Gaudiya Math. During the 1920s and 1930s, when the Gaudiya Math depended mainly on congregational members, Bhaktisiddhanta engaged twenty *sannyasis* in visiting the laity and holding outreach programmes in their homes (ibid, p.114-115). The partnership with the laity was important for the growth of the Gaudiya Math, which also became true for ISKCON, especially from

⁶³ “The three sticks (*danda*) that the sannyasi constantly carries symbolize a threefold vow to serve the supreme Lord with body, mind and speech” (Sherbow, 2004, p.139).

the 1980s onwards. By the time of his death there were sixty-four Gaudiya Maths in India, as well as one in Burma.

Bhaktisiddhanta also introduced innovative preaching techniques. The preaching methods used by Bhaktisiddhanta's followers were a straightforward application of Bhaktivinoda's *nama-hatta* preaching strategy. The celibate monks, the *sannyasis* and *brahmacaris*, were sent out to different parts of India to travel from village to village and hold outreach programmes. These events were mainly propagating the practice of *kirtan*, the ecstatic public chanting of Krishna's names, a lecture on Vaishnava scriptures and at the end, the distribution of *prasadam*, sacred food offered to the deity. The preaching and outreach strategies opened up routes for newcomers to take up the ritual practices. For Bhaktisiddhanta the daily chanting of Krishna's names, daily worship of the deities and the following of the regular temple programmes were principal ways of purifying the body, mind, and soul.

Lord Zetland,⁶⁴ when he was governor of Bengal, took the opportunity to visit Navadvipa, the place where Bhaktisiddhanta stayed, and wrote his impression of the devotional singing he experienced in his autobiography (*Essayez*, p.91): "... I witnessed the participants by means of song and dance work themselves up into a state of religious ecstasy, which revealed to me a glimpse of a latent emotional reservoir beyond anything I had dreamt of" (*ibid*, p.154).

The recitation of Krishna's names was the main ritual practice of the members of the Gaudiya Math. Bhaktisiddhanta regarded the absorption in the names of

⁶⁴ Lord Zetland was born in London in 1876 under the name of Lawrence John Lumley Dundas, Earl of Ronaldsday. He was known as Lord Dundas until 1892, and then as Earl of Ronaldshay until he succeeded his father as the Second Marquess of Zetland in 1929. He was a politician, educated at Harrow School and Trinity College in Cambridge. He functioned as governor of Bengal from 1917 to 1922 (Sardella, 2013, p.152).

Krishna as no different from meeting God in person. From a letter dated October 20, 1928 it appears that he encouraged residing disciples of the Gaudiya Matha, as well as the laity, to strive to recite at least hundred thousand names of Krishna each day as a means to develop and maintain devotional consciousness while dealing with the world (Bhaktisiddhanta, 1984, vol. 1., p.53).

Bhaktisiddhanta instituted particular formalised procedures for entry into the Gaudiya Math, and for entrants to attain brahminhood through a process of rigorous training. Sardella (2013, pp.116-117) describes these procedures. To become an ashrama resident, an opportunity available to men only, meant going through a rite of passage for initiation as a celibate student (*brahmacari*). The novice acquired new social roles and was asked to internalise the identity of a Chaitanya follower in values and behaviour. This included obedience to the guru and senior members of the Gaudiya Math. After proving his commitment, the novice would receive his first initiation, a ceremony in which the initiate would receive a new “spiritual” name from Bhaktisiddhanta. The initiate then had the choice to either leave the ashram or continue to live as a celibate monk under the direction of the senior representative of Bhaktisiddhanta. If the resident was found to qualify, he would receive his second ‘Brahmin’ initiation and receive the *gayatri* mantra. The Brahmin was then authorised to wear the sacred thread and worship the images of the deity on the temple shrine.

Bhaktisiddhanta shared Bhaktivinoda’s vision of spreading Vaishnavism beyond India’s confines. He was also interested, simultaneously, to unite all Vaishnavas, regardless of sectarian affiliation, in order to collectively stem the tide of non-dualism. He sought to meet both these objectives by re-establishing the *Visva Vaishnava Raja Sabha* in 1920, which Bhaktivinoda had created in 1885. From Bhaktisiddhanta’s elaboration of the global society’s goals, published in an article in

the magazine *Sajjanatosani*, it appears that the main objectives of the association related to the opening up of routes for spreading the ritual practices of chanting and disseminating the Vaishnava scriptures, as well as for the printing and distribution of books, one of Bhaktivinoda's major proselytising strategies. According to a summary of a charter published within the same article, the society aimed at:

- a. Spreading of God's sacred names (*nama*), which involved travelling all around the world and perform public chanting (*kirtan*), teaching the conclusions of the *Bhagavata Purana* to the masses, and fulfilling the intentions of the movement's preceptors;
- b. Dissemination of sacred books (*sastra pracara*), which involved the acquisition, preservation, publication, and distribution of Chaitanyaite and other Vaishnava texts. This group also researched the history of these books, as well as their authors;
- c. Teaching of scriptural instructions (*sastra siksa*), which involved the creation of programmes for the systematic study of *bhakti* literature.⁶⁵

Bhaktisiddhanta sought to fulfil Bhaktivinoda's desire to spread Chaitanya Vaishnavism beyond the borders of India by sending a *sannyasa* disciple Swami Bon and two assistants, in April 1933, on a mission to England and Nazi Germany. In London Swami Bon was well received and had the opportunity to meet with influential figures, and left a good impression, but was unable to make disciples. In Nazi Germany, Swami Bon, with the help of Ernst Schulze, published a book in German, *Gedanken über den Hinduismus*, met with influential people and gave lectures at universities. Swami Bon, however, had to flee Germany as his presentations were found to be incompatible with National Socialism's racial theory. Schulze and Swami Bon went back to Calcutta via London. Later on, Schulze became a *sannyasa* disciple of Bhaktisiddhanta (ibid, pp.159-170).

It is significant, in the light of the later development of ISKCON, that in 1922 a meeting took place between Bhaktisiddhanta and a certain Abhay Charan De, a

⁶⁵ *Sajjanatosani* 21, nos. 8-9 (1920); pp. 259-262 (in Sardella, 2013, p.97).

manager of a chemical factory in Calcutta. Somewhere during that year, after being persuaded by Narendranatha Mallik, a college friend, to meet Bhaktisiddanta, Abhay Charan De agreed to attend one of his lectures. During that first meeting Bhaktisiddanta asked Abhay Charan and his friend: “You are educated young boys. Why don’t you take up Lord Chaitanya’s message and preach in the Western world?” Abhay Charan De received formal initiation from Bhaktisiddhanta in 1933, and later became the founder of ISKCON under his *sannyasa* name Abhay Charanavinda Bhaktivedanta Swami (Sardella, 2013, pp.102-103). In the next section I will provide a brief biographic outline of Bhaktivedanta’s life, emphasising the innovations he introduced and his strategies for promoting ritual practice in the West.⁶⁶

2.6. Abhay Charan De – Abhay Charanavinda Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977)

Bhaktivedanta was born on September 1, 1896 in Calcutta as Abhay Charan De.⁶⁷ His father Gaur Mohan De raised his son according to orthodox Vaishnava faith and encouraged him in the ritual worship of Krishna. After completing his education at Scottish Church College in Calcutta,⁶⁸ and following his marriage with Radharani Datta, Abhay became a department manager of Kartick Chandra Bose’s Laboratory in Calcutta, and started a career in the pharmaceutical industry (Goswami, 1980, pp.1-36).

⁶⁶ Elaborate details can be found in the well-researched hagiography *A Lifetime in Preparation, 1896-1965* (Goswami, 1980).

⁶⁷ Bhaktivedanta was born the day after the traditional date (by the lunar calendar) of the birth of Krishna. Therefore it is not surprising that his parents named him Abhay Charan, “one who fearlessly takes shelter at the lotus feet of Krishna” (Goswami, 2012, p.32).

⁶⁸ “Alexander Duff in 1830 founded the Scottish Church College, an institution that was responsible for the education of thousands of upper-caste Hindu students, several of whom went on to become leading figures—for example, Swami Vivekananda, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, and the religious freedom fighter Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907)” (Goswami, 2012, p.39).

Following his first meeting with Bhaktisiddhanta in 1922, Abhay became gradually involved in the preaching mission of the Gaudiya Math,⁶⁹ which led him to accept formal initiation in 1933. During their first meeting, Bhaktisiddhanta asked Abhay to preach to the English-speaking people of the world. In 1939, six years after the demise of Bhaktisiddhanta, his godbrothers (disciples of the same guru) conferred on him the title “Bhaktivedanta”, or one who has the qualities of learning and devotion (Goswami, 2012, p.33).

In 1950 Bhaktivedanta renounced his family responsibilities. Initially he struggled to continue his mission, and faced grave financial and other challenges.⁷⁰ On the morning of September 17, 1959, he received the order of *sannyasa* and the name A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (Satsvarupa, 1980, p.230). He received *sannyasa* from Bhakti Prajnana Kesava Swami in a Gaudiya Math temple situated in downtown Mathura (Uttar Pradesh). Kesava Swami, a disciple of Bhaktisiddhanta, led the ceremony on behalf of the preceptoral descent of the Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition. Following this, he stayed in a room adjacent to the Radha Damodara temple in Vrindavana (Uttar Pradesh) to prepare for his mission abroad.⁷¹ After translating the first canto of the *Bhagavata Purana* into English, and managing the printing of two hundred copies of its three-volume translation, Bhaktivedanta, on August 13, 1965, at the age of seventy, left for America on-board the cargo-ship Jaladuta to fulfil the mission of his spiritual master. Goswami (2012, p.33) claims that the command to start a global mission was not the unique idea of Bhaktisiddhanta but was rather his

⁶⁹ Bhaktivedanta helped to raise funds to establish temples in Allahabad and Bombay. He also occasionally contributed to the *Harmonist*, an English fortnightly (Goswami, 2012, p.111).

⁷⁰ Goswami argues that Bhaktivedanta’s disappointment with family life and the collapse of his business were important factors inducing in him a spirit of detachment and renunciation (Goswami, 2012, p.33).

⁷¹ Just a few days before his guru’s demise, Bhaktivedanta received a confirmation of his mission from Bhaktisiddhanta: “I have every hope that you can turn yourself into a very good English preacher if you serve the mission to inculcate the novel impression of Lord Chaitanya’s teachings to the people in general as well as philosophers and religionists” (Goswami, 1980, p.34).

attempt to bring to fruition Chaitanya's own prophecy that "in as many towns and villages as there are on the surface of the earth, My holy name will be preached".⁷²

Bhaktivedanta arrived in America at Boston harbour on board the cargo ship from India in September 1965. After a brief stay in the small town of Butler, at the home of an acquaintance's son, he moved to New York, where he attracted followers through his presentation of Vaishnavism, and eventually established a temple. On July 11, 1966, Bhaktivedanta officially incorporated ISKCON in New York. His followers then opened a second centre in San Francisco. Soon after, centres in Montreal, Boston, Santa Fe, and London were opened. ISKCON first spread to other cities in North America and the United Kingdom, and then to mainland Europe, Australia, Latin America, Africa, and India. In more recent years the movement has spread to Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (former Soviet Union).

While travelling outside of India, Bhaktivedanta would continue the translation of his literary work. Mostly after midnight, he would sit down and consult the commentaries of predecessors and provide his own translation and commentary. His commentaries formed the intellectual basis on which ISKCON would be built (Goswami, 2012, p.35). Nearly twelve years after the foundation of the ISKCON institution, Bhaktivedanta passed away in Vrindavana, India, at the age of eighty-one on November 14, 1977 (Sardella, 2013, p.247).

Bhaktivedanta's mission was grounded on principles set forward by Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta. His mission was marked by a number of key features, which are listed below, and subsequently explained in the light of

⁷² This is the translation of verse *Antya* 4:126 from *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, a hagiography of Chaitanya written by Vrindavana das Thakura.

Chaitanya's legacy as passed down through Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta.

Bhaktivedanta's mission was:

(1) to translate the essential Vaishnava scriptures and continue the work begun by Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta;

(2) to train a core of dedicated disciples to spread Chaitanya Vaishnavism, and continue the work of Bhaktisiddhanta outside India;

(3) to create a world-wide organisation to fulfil Bhaktivinoda's vision of a global Chaitanya movement, and to promote the ritualistic practice of devotion to a personal God;

(4) to conduct widespread propaganda, mainly by printing and distributing books, a practice initiated by Bhaktivinoda and refined and modernised by Bhaktisiddhanta;

(5) to fight against non-dualist schools and to challenge heredity as the basis of Brahmin status.

It is clear that while Bhaktivinoda's emphasis was on the recovery of the tradition, Bhaktisiddhanta's focus was on the tradition's consolidation and expansion. Their contributions paved the way for Bhaktivedanta's global mission. I would argue that Bhaktivedanta's missionary plan is consistent with Bhaktivinoda's and Bhaktisiddhanta's proselytising strategies. This is borne out by an examination of Bhaktivedanta's approach to book publishing, his establishment of international institutions, the propagation of the chanting, book distribution, his fight against the system of Brahmin heredity, his strong preaching against non-dualism, his extensive use of Bhaktivinoda's *Nama-Hatta*-style outreach programme and his views on Jesus Christ and Christianity. These crucial features of Bhaktivedanta's mission are discussed below.

Bhaktivedanta wrote around seventy books published by ISKCON's publishing arm, the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust. For his translation work of Vaishnava scriptures, Bhaktivedanta relied on the commentaries of Bhaktivinoda, Bhaktisiddhanta and other Sanskrit commentaries of Visvanatha Chakravarti and Madhva.⁷³ For his rendition of the *Bhagavata Purana*, he depended mainly on Bhaktisiddhanta's *Gaudiya Bhasya*, a twelve-volume edition of the *Bhagavata Purana*. Bhaktivedanta cites the same texts and commentaries referred to by Bhaktisiddhanta. In addition, from the fifth book of the *Bhagavata Purana* on, he includes the translations of Bhaktisiddhanta's chapter summaries at the beginning of each chapter. Especially his commentary on the *Chaitanya Charitamrita* is mainly a translation of the work of Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta (Goswami, 2012, p. 113-114). Bhaktivedanta also makes hundreds of references to Bhaktivinoda's Vaishnava songs in his books.

In September 1965, Bhaktivedanta started to attract Western followers in New York by the chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra in Tompkins Square Park and giving lectures in various locations. Bhaktivedanta's lectures were usually preceded by chanting and followed by the distribution of *prasadam*, sanctified food. Using the "nama-hatta" preaching style of Bhaktivinoda, he gradually started to train a core of disciples to spread Chaitanya Vaishnavism in the West.

On July 11, 1966 Bhaktivedanta took the first step toward creating a worldwide organisation by establishing the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). ISKCON's articles of incorporation reveal similarities with the charter describing the aims of Bhaktivinoda's *Visva Vaishnava Raja Sabha*

⁷³ Bhaktivedanta's translation of the *Bhagavata Purana* and other works, generally were done verse-by-verse. He presented them in their original Sanskrit or Bengali script, followed by a word-by-word translation in English, an English translation and a commentary (Goswami, 2012, p.35).

established in 1885.⁷⁴ Both emphasise the spreading of God’s names, the distribution of Vaishnava scriptures, and the teaching of these scriptural instructions. Before his departure in 1937, Bhaktisiddhanta instructed his followers to appoint a governing body commission to lead the movement after his departure. Accordingly, to manage the international society, Bhaktivedanta established the Governing Body Commission (GBC) in 1970 as ISKCON’s ultimate international managerial authority.

Bhaktivinoda’s strategy of printing and distributing Vaishnava literature, applied and expanded by Bhaktisiddhanta, became for Bhaktivedanta the main focus for spreading the movement.⁷⁵ To manage the international book distribution he founded on May 29, 1972 the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust (BBT) in Los Angeles.

Bhaktisiddhanta’s fight against the non-dualistic schools and his strong opposition to heredity as the basis of brahminhood opened the possibility for Bhaktivedanta to initiate Western disciples and spread the movement globally. In a number of commentaries Bhaktivedanta refers to Bhaktisiddhanta’s warning to avoid hearing or reading non-dualist philosophy, especially the *Sariraka-bhasya*, a commentary on *Vedanta-sutra*, written by Shankara (ca, 788-820). An example of this is Bhaktivedanta’s commentary on verse *Adi* 101, Chapter Seven of *Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita*:

⁷⁴ These articles are: (a) to systematically propagate spiritual knowledge to society at large and to educate all peoples in the techniques of spiritual life in order to check the imbalance of values in life and to achieve real unity and peace in the world; (b) to propagate a consciousness of Krishna as it is revealed in the *Bhagavat Gita* and *Srimad Bhagavatam*; (c) to bring the members of the Society together with each other and nearer to Krishna, the prime entity, and thus to develop the idea, within the members, and humanity, at large, that each soul is part and parcel of the quality of Godhead (Krishna); (d) to teach and encourage the Sankirtan movement—congregational chanting of the holy names of God as revealed in the teachings of Lord Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu; (e) To erect for the members, and for society at large, a holy place of transcendental pastimes, dedicated to the personality of Krishna; (f) to bring the members closer together for the purpose of teaching a simpler and more natural way of life; (g) with a view towards achieving the aforementioned purposes, to publish and distribute periodicals, magazines, books and other writings (Bhaktivedanta, 2012p).

⁷⁵ For instance on January 20, 1972 Bhaktivedanta wrote Mandali Bhadra: “My first concern is that my books shall be published and distributed profusely all over the world. Practically, books are the basis of our movement. Without our books, our preaching will have no effect...” (Bhaktivedanta, 2012p).

The ... commentary *Sariraka-bhasya* is like poison for a Vaishnava. It should not be touched at all. Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura remarks that even a *maha-bhagavata*, or highly elevated devotee who has surrendered himself unto the lotus feet of Krishna, sometimes falls down from pure devotional service if he hears the *Mayavada* philosophy of the *Sariraka-bhasya*. This commentary should therefore be shunned by all Vaishnavas (Bhaktivedanta, 2012i).

Similarly Bhaktivedanta, in another commentary, on verse *Adi 27* Chapter Twelve of *Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita* condemns the reading of books written by hereditary caste *goswamis*. The term “hereditary caste *goswamis*” refers to a hereditary class of Brahmins, called the *smarta* Brahmins, who are of the opinion that one can only become a Brahmin by birth and that one must have taken birth in a family of Brahmins to perform all traditional rituals. Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura says that sometimes these *smarta* caste *goswamis* write books on Vaishnava philosophy or commentaries on the original scriptures, but a pure devotee should cautiously avoid reading them” (Bhaktivedanta, 2012i).

While Bhaktivedanta followed his precedent gurus in their critique on certain aspects of Hindu practice; he also adopted their approach of building bridges between Vaishnava and Judeo-Christian traditions. Bhaktivedanta, in line with Bhaktivinoda’s identification of Islam and Christianity as “vaishnava-type” religions, maintained that Christianity or any other mainstream religious tradition aiming at loving God represents a form of Vaishnavism:

“This awakening of pure love of God is the ultimate perfection of all bona fide religious principles including Christian, Judaic, Mohammedan, Hindu, etc. Just as it is recorded that Lord Jesus Christ said that the first commandment is that one should love God with all his heart, and soul and mind...[similarly] Krsna instructs that everyone should surrender unto Him in love. Lord Jesus says that the first thing is to develop your love for God. Krsna is God. Krsna says to love Him only. So what is the

difference between the original teachings of Lord Jesus Christ and Krsna?”
(Bhaktivedanta, 2012e).

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Bhaktivedanta was a student at Scottish Churches College in Calcutta and was introduced to Christian beliefs. In the Vedabase (Bhaktivedanta, 2012), a compilation of all Bhaktivedanta’s writings, Bhaktivedanta referred 1,181 times to Jesus Christ. He presents Jesus Christ as a person having the qualities of a Vaishnava, a God-conscious person. He praises Jesus for dedicating his life to spreading God consciousness,⁷⁶ for his tolerance, compassion, his acceptance of distress as the Lord’s will, and for opposing animal slaughter:

Jesus Christ said, ‘Do not kill’, but hypocrites nevertheless maintain thousands of slaughterhouses while posing as Christians (Commentary on *Bhagavata Purana* verse 6.10.9).

It is said that Lord Jesus Christ, when twelve years old, was shocked to see the Jews sacrificing birds and animals in the synagogues and that he therefore rejected the Jewish system of religion and started the religious system of Christianity, adhering to the Old Testament commandment: ‘Thou shalt not kill’ (Commentary on *Bhagavata Purana* verse 7.15.10) (Bhaktivedanta, 2012m).

Furthermore, Bhaktivedanta eulogises Jesus Christ for his tolerance and compassion: “Lord Jesus Christ even tolerated crucifixion” (Commentary on *Bhagavata Purana* verse 6.4.44) and “Jesus Christ was seemingly put into such great difficulty, being crucified by the ignorant, but he was never angry at the mischief-mongers. That is the way of accepting a thing, either favourably or unfavourably [as God’s mercy] (Commentary on *Bhagavata Purana* verse 1.17.22) (Bhaktivedanta, 2012m). Of course, it can easily be argued that Bhaktivedanta used certain aspects of Christian

⁷⁶ From the commentary on *Bhagavad Gita* verse 11.55: “There are many examples in history of devotees of the Lord who risked their lives for the spreading of God consciousness. The favourite example is Lord Jesus Christ. He was crucified by the non-devotees, but he sacrificed his life for spreading God consciousness” (Bhaktivedanta, 2012c).

theology and quoted from the Bible only to encourage his disciples to see Jesus as a Vaishnava and to look at Christianity through a set of Vaishnava beliefs.

Another important observation is that Bhaktivedanta's methods of presenting Chaitanya Vaishnavism are based on Bhaktisiddhanta and Bhaktivinoda's *nama-hatta* method of direct presentation of the ritual practices of chanting, hearing the teachings from a guru, and distribution of *prasadam* (*sanctified* food).⁷⁷ The meditational rite of chanting, explored in-depth in the next chapter, is the pivotal ritual of Chaitanya Vaishnavism. Bhaktivedanta saw his endeavour to spread this practice in the Western countries as an execution of the instruction he received from Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta.⁷⁸

Bhaktivedanta also introduced a number of innovations. With respect to the practice of chanting, Bhaktivedanta reduced the number of Krishna's names, which each adherent is required to chant daily, to a fourth of the number of mantras that Bhaktisiddhanta required from his disciples,⁷⁹ because he considered that it would be too difficult for Westerners to perform mantra-meditation for a long time.

Another innovation was that Bhaktivedanta offered Brahmin initiation to female disciples and allowed them to engage in worshipping Krishna's deity form, a practice explained in the next chapter. Bhaktivedanta also respected the waiting time

⁷⁷ Since his early childhood Bhaktivedanta was trained in all principal Vaishnava rites. His father Madan Mohan De and his mother Radharani Datta had in their home a shrine for the worship of Krishna. They also took Abhay regularly to the neighbouring Mullik's temple to worship Krishna (Goswami, 2012, p.33).

⁷⁸ In his commentary on verse 4.22.42 of the *Bhagavata Purana* Bhaktivedanta writes: "Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu predicted that both His glorious names and the Hare Krishna *maha-mantra* would be broadcast in all towns and villages in the world. Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura and Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati desired to fulfill this great predication, and we are following in their footsteps" (Bhaktivedanta, 2012m).

⁷⁹ One fourth equals to sixteen times hundred-and-eight mantras or 1,728 times chanting of the mantra *Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare/ Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare*.

for aspiring disciples, of six months to one year, as set by Bhaktisiddhanta, and combined it with a system of recommendation from local Temple Presidents – a procedure explained in the next chapter focusing on the present-day practices and procedures of entry in ISKCON.

2.7. The Outreach Strategies of ISKCON

Since Bhaktivedanta's foundation of ISKCON in 1966, ISKCON's outreach strategies, causing its global expansion, were firmly rooted in the proselytising methods set forward by Bhaktivinoda, Bhaktisiddhanta, and Bhaktivedanta. The implementation and growth of book printing and distribution, and the spreading of the ritual practices associated with chanting and *prasadam*, boosted by applied *nama-hatta* outreach events, became the heartbeat of ISKCON's existence.

According to an article posted on 13 December 2008 on the official ISKCON News website,⁸⁰ 464 million copies of Bhaktivedanta's books have been sold since 1965. During the early 1970s, the movement's missionary enthusiasm was high. Bhaktivedanta established the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust in Los Angeles in 1972, to manage the international book distribution.

The book distribution provided finances supporting the expansion of the movement internationally. Following the example of Bhaktivinoda, who edited and published more than a hundred books in Sanskrit, Bengali and English, Bhaktivedanta, throughout the seventies, was constantly writing and publishing books. This inspired disciples all over the world to sell the books and distribute them widely. For instance,

⁸⁰ <http://news.iskcon.com/nod/1546> last accessed on July 8, 2013.

up to 70,000 books were sometimes distributed in one week in Britain. In America, they organised a fleet of buses travelling all over the United States to distribute books. They were not only distributing books in the streets, but also at airports all over the country.

Bhaktivedanta's books have been translated into more than eighty languages. *Back to Godhead*, a magazine originally published by Bhaktivedanta during the Second World War period, became an international magazine with an international distribution rate of more than 570,000 copies per year, including versions translated in Indian languages (Cole, 2007, pp.27-34).

After Bhaktivedanta's demise on 14 November 1977, book distribution was still increasing until the beginning of the 1980s. In the eighties, due to the fact that many *brahmacari* monks engaged in book distribution were getting married, the income generated by the book distribution shrunk, and as a result, the book sales dropped significantly. In the 1990s, and the decade thereafter, the book distribution continued in a moderate and regular way but remained low compared to the top sales in the 1970s. ISKCON, during the last forty years, always encouraged its members to engage in book distribution. Book distribution is considered to be the main means of spreading Krishna Chaitanya Vaishnavism because the words of Bhaktivedanta are considered to be spiritually powerful.

Since the 1970s, especially during the month of December, it has become a tradition nearly all over the world, for adherents of the Hare Krishna movement to go out daily to distribute their books to the public. This annual event is called the Book Distribution Marathon. In many temples and centres, at the beginning of the marathon, a festival is held, a celebration in which the activity of book distribution is glorified

and promoted as a sacrifice for Prabhupada.⁸¹ Participation is considered to be a selfless practice that enables one to make quick spiritual advancement. Then, four weeks later, the marathon is concluded with festivals in which the book distribution scores are read and all participants are felicitated for their participation. The scores relate to the number of books each person has distributed. Adherents of different temples, as well as individuals, compete with each other to distribute the highest number of books.

ISKCON's expansion, however, was not only due to the distribution of literature. According to T. K. Goswami (2012, pp.197-198), *prasadam* became a hallmark of Bhaktivedanta's mission and the "secret weapon" in his preaching arsenal. He writes: "ISKCON, a 'kitchen religion', has shaped itself to the cultural landscapes it encounters, from hippie-inspired 'Love Feasts' to the programmatic relief of the destitute (Food for Life) and to a chain of Govinda's restaurants". ISKCON adherents only eat food that has first been sanctified through a ritual offering before an image of Krishna. It is important to note that ISKCON's distribution of *prasadam* (as introduced and practiced by Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta), is essential to all temples, outreach, and festival programmes.

ISKCON's free international food distribution programme for the destitute, homeless, poor, and disadvantaged, has served about 900 million meals between 1965 and 1995.⁸² Even in recent times, Cole (2007, p.47) claims that ISKCON served globally 50,000 plates per day. In addition, it has conducted relief operations such as in Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu, following the 2004 tsunami. A worldwide chain of

⁸¹ Prabhupada: master at whose feet all other masters surrender (Bhaktivedanta, 2012a); an honorific title used for Bhaktivedanta.

⁸² "There is still debate in ISKCON as to whether it should be engaged in 'mundane' charitable work, but the giving out of *prasadam*, sanctified food which has been offered to Krishna, falls into the category of preaching" (King, 2013, p.42).

Govindas restaurants serves high quality vegetarian meals to the general public. The religious philosophy behind the ritual offering of food is explained in the following chapter.

ISKCON's *prasadam* distribution was first introduced through Bhaktivedanta's straightforward application of Bhaktivinoda's *nama-hatta* preaching style. When Bhaktivedanta converted a shop-front into a small temple at 26 Second Avenue in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1966, he would chant prayers to the spiritual master and Chaitanya, chant the Hare Krishna mantra, give a lecture every evening, and distribute sanctified food, *prasadam*. Many visitors stayed after the lecture to relish the *prasadam*, or to ask questions.

Allan Ginsberg, the famous lyricist and idol of the hippy culture, avowedly opposed to militarism and sexual repression, was part of Bhaktivedanta's early congregation and he helped to popularise the chanting in America. When Bhaktivedanta started to sing the Hare Krishna mantra along with the rhythmic ringing produced from his gold coloured hand cymbals in New York's Tompkins Square Park, people heard the singing. Captivated by the sound many youngsters started to sing with the Swami and became attracted to the practice.

After Bhaktivedanta had initiated his first disciples, all of whom had vowed to chant a fixed number of Hare Krishna mantras daily for the rest of their lives, he sent them out, with small cymbals and *mridangas* (Indian two-sided drums), to chant the Hare Krishna mantra publicly in the streets (*kirtan*). During the following years the Hare Krishna chanting became popularised all over the world when George Harrison and the Beatles introduced the mantra through a number of songs. It was also popularised through the performance of the world-famous musical *Hair*, a love-rock

musical in which the Hare Krishna mantra was sung as a refrain. In this way ISKCON became known as the “Hare Krishna movement”, a term referring to the main ritual practice of its adherents (Cole, 2007, p.29).

It is important to note that the ISKCON Governing Body (GBC), established by Bhaktivedanta in 1970, claims that it has no other function than to execute the founder’s instructions.⁸³ Bearing in mind that Bhaktivedanta’s approach generally supports the views of Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta, it is not unreasonable to assume that the GBC-level discussions are supposed to be held on the basis of their views. Notwithstanding this, ISKCON has introduced a number of important innovations after the departure of Srila Prabhupada on November 14, 1977.

The first change was that ISKCON was transformed into a multi-guru society.⁸⁴ As noted earlier, early in 1978 the globe was divided in eleven zones, and for each zone a “zonal” guru was appointed. However, by the mid-1980s more than half of the gurus had fallen short of the expected norms of behaviour, leading to a schism and causing many devotees to leave ISKCON.⁸⁵ This led to a reform of the guru-system, and the instituting of a more liberalised guru approval system,⁸⁶ a

⁸³ ISKCON Law; Article 3.12. Principles. The GBC accepts as it life and soul, the instructions of His Divine Grace Srila Prabhupada and recognizes that it is completely dependent on his mercy in all respects. The GBC has no other function or purpose than to execute the instructions so kindly given by His Divine Grace and to preserve and spread his teachings to the world in their pure form (ISKCON GBC, 2007, p.10).

⁸⁴ All ISKCON gurus, before accepting disciples, made a vow of loyalty to the teachings and standards set by Bhaktivedanta. After the demise of Bhaktivedanta in 1977, ISKCON was transformed into a multi-guru movement. The spiritual master’s role in ISKCON is to deliver the ChaitanyaVaishnava teachings as they came down through the “disciplic” succession of spiritual masters, up to Bhaktivedanta.

⁸⁵ The M. A. Thesis of Bloch (2007) is an excellent work containing detailed information about the different schisms that occurred in ISKCON.

⁸⁶ The “Guru Non-objection Procedure”, is the official name of the system for authorizing gurus in ISKCON. An area council, a local authority composed of ten senior ISKCON members related to the area where the candidate guru is serving, discusses whether the candidate has the necessary qualifications (free from sex desire and the desire for honour and prestige, etc.) for becoming a guru. If the council deems the candidate to be qualified then they propose his or her name for ratification by the ISKCON GBC Body (ISKCON GBC, 2007, section 6.4). In principle, the system offers equal opportunities to male and female candidates to receive authorization to act as an ISKCON guru. In

procedure that is still valid today.⁸⁷ These reforms had an important impact on the procedure of entry into ISKCON. As a multi-guru society the GBC became concerned about power issues. The reform of the guru-system had created a dual line of authority, a “spiritual” line of authority through which gurus had an immense influence on the lives of their disciples, and a more managerial- oriented line of authority represented by GBC secretaries governing zones consisting of one or more countries and all the ISKCON temples, centres and local congregations situated in these zones.

To ensure that both gurus and disciples remain loyal to the managerial authority of the GBC, gurus and disciples are made subordinate to the GBC, and cooperate with its international strategies. In addition, on the level of the spiritual line of authority the guru’s ‘teachings must be in line and strictly represent the teachings of Bhaktivedanta, considered the main *siksha* (instructing) spiritual master of all ISKCON members.

2.8. Summary and Conclusions

The last 200 years’ legacy of Chaitanya Vaishnavism has set the context in which conversion to ISKCON is best understood. Entering ISKCON entails exposure to a set of preaching strategies and cooperation with schemes of ritual practice, both of which emerged and developed historically through the initiatives of the founder figures of Gaudiya Vaishnavism in the 19th and 20th centuries.

recent years (2009 to 2014), the application of female candidates has always raised objections from a number of GBC members. There would seem to be a divide between the Indian and non-Indian members of the highly patriarchal GBC Body, which includes only two female GBC Zonal Secretaries in its thirty-five members. The Indian GBC members are against the appointment of female gurus as they believe that it will hurt ISKCON’s reputation in India as a genuine spiritual institution.

⁸⁷ According to the official ISKCON guru list issued in March 2015, ISKCON has eighty-three *diksha* or initiating gurus.

The key revivalists of Chaitanya Vaishnavism, Bhaktivinoda (1838-1914), Bhaktisiddhanta (1874-1937), and Bhaktivedanta (1896-1977), employed a range of methods to revive the tradition and its ritual practice despite opposition from proponents of *advaita*. Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta's strong preaching against non-dualism and their opposition to the hereditary status of Brahmins opened up the possibility to initiate Western disciples, and thus spread the movement globally. Bhaktivedanta made use of this opportunity and furthered the work of his predecessors by also offering Brahmin initiation to female disciples.

While Bhaktivinoda attempted to spread Chaitanya Vaishnavism to foreign countries by sending his booklet 'Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu: His Life and Precepts' overseas to various university libraries in the West, Bhaktisiddhanta contributed to the same effort by sending three disciples on a mission to England and Nazi Germany. However, the actual international expansion of Chaitanya Vaishnavism took place later, through the efforts of Bhaktivedanta. Bhaktivedanta borrowed Bhaktivinoda's strategies of building bridges with Judeo-Christian traditions by presenting Jesus Christ as a Vaishnava. He encouraged his followers from Christian backgrounds to see their Christian faith through the framework of Chaitanya Vaishnava theology.

All three key figures sought to give their movement a strong institutional basis. Just as Bhaktisiddhanta in 1920 established the Gaudiya Matha and re-established the Visva Vaishnava Raja Sabha, created in 1885 by Bhaktivinoda, Bhaktivedanta, in 1966, founded ISKCON. While Bhaktisiddhanta opened sixty-four centres in India, Bhaktivedanta inaugurated more than a hundred ISKCON temples spread across the continents.

ISKCON adopted Bhaktisiddhanta's introduction of a waiting period of (at least) one year prior to new entrants receiving initiation. Bhaktivedanta, in response to the quick international growth of the movement, added another condition, namely that the candidate initiate must first receive a letter of recommendation from the local ISKCON Temple President. ISKCON later on developed a more elaborate procedure of entry, but continued to respect the rules established by both predecessor gurus.

Some of Bhaktivinoda's major contributions were his writing and printing of Vaishnava scriptures, commentaries, books, poems, songs and magazines. Bhaktisiddhanta expanded these activities, installed four printing presses, and printed books, and magazines in various Indic languages. Bhaktivedanta later on continued this tradition by translating the writings and commentaries in English and printing millions of copies. Gradually ISKCON took up the mission to translate most of the books of Bhaktivinoda, Bhaktisiddhanta and Bhaktivedanta into more than eighty languages. The printing went hand in hand with the distribution of the books, which Bhaktisiddhanta had first organised in India. Bhaktivedanta expanded and established regular book distribution through ISKCON all over the world.

All these strategies are meant to support the setting up of routes for bringing individuals in contact with the practices of chanting, kirtan, hearing lectures and the practice of preparing, offering and eating prasadam. Bhaktivinoda introduced the *nama-hatta* system, which was based on these three ritual practices. Bhaktisiddhanta, after having concluded his vow of chanting the one billion names of Krishna, spread the Gaudiya Math institution all over India by using his *sannyasi* and *brahmacari* disciples to organise outreach programmes using Bhaktivinoda's method of singing the sacred names of Krishna, lecturing and distributing prasadam. Bhaktivedanta used

the same system in the West, and, long after his lifetime, ISKCON continues to use the same methods and strategies.

The spreading of the tradition's different forms of ritual practice is the core of ISKCON's proselytising strategy. The history shows how the different forms of ritual practice, which are the key elements governing entry into ISKCON, emerged in conjunction with the rise of a number of particular proselytising methods within the last 200-year history of the Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition. Awareness of that history is a prerequisite to understanding entry into ISKCON in its own social and cultural contexts.

The ritual practices discussed in the next chapter can be divided into two main categories — first, the initiation rites, e.g. rituals marking the end of the novitiate and the incorporation of the novice into the devotee community, and rituals marking initiation into priesthood (Brahminhood); second, daily ritual practices which include ritual chanting and image worship, the sanctification of food, and scripture reading which can be considered rites for purification, and which also serve to inculcate the Society's beliefs and values. Having explored the historical context of ISKCON's ritual observance in this chapter, I will now examine, in the next chapter ISKCON's present-day ritual practice, and analyse the schemes of ritualisation central to the different levels of its initiation rites.

Chapter Three: Contemporary Practice in ISKCON

Following the historical appraisal in the previous chapter, Chapter Three discusses the structured environment that individuals encounter when they enter ISKCON. That environment is primarily shaped by various forms of rituals and practices performed within ISKCON and secondarily by ISKCON's institutional setup, its social hierarchy, and the successive levels of initiation that members undergo as they gain eligibility to move up ISKCON's institutional ladder. Based on two analyses of subjective experiences expressed in in-depth interviews, the last section explores the modes of entry of individuals entering ISKCON.

3.1. Ritual Practices Centred on Krishna's 'Avatars'

Bhaktirasamrita Sindhu, a work describing devotional practice compiled by Rupa Goswami, one of the direct followers of Chaitanya, and translated by Bhaktivedanta in the form of a summary study as *The Nectar of Devotion* (Bhaktivedanta, 2012n), describes the five most potent items in the practice of *bhakti*. These items are considered to be 'descents' of Krishna into this world, or different earthly manifestations of Krishna. Each of these practices is understood to offer a direct experience of this polymorphic deity. The five items are the chanting of Krishna's names, the worship of authorised deity forms, the recitation and reading of devotional scriptures, residence in a temple or a holy place where Krishna's deity is worshipped, and associating with saintly persons and gurus.

B. Holdrege (2009), studying Gaudiya Vaishnava perspectives, refers to these as "the five avatars of God found in Gaudiya Vaishnavism". These five avatars are *nama* avatar, the sound of Krishna's names; *murti* avatar, the deity form; *sastra*

avatar, the sacred scriptures; *dhama* avatar, holy places; and guru avatar, the spiritual master. In what follows, I will describe the principal characteristics of ritual practice in ISKCON, giving special attention to these five avatars – the chanting of Krishna’s holy names, image worship, the guru, the scriptures and the importance of ISKCON temples and preaching centres. I also discuss the practices of cooking, offering and consumption of sanctified food (*prasadam*). These practices represent the principal routes by which individuals come in contact with ISKCON.

3.1.1. Chanting

G. Beck (1995, p.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 is an act of power” (ibid, p.205).⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹

The tradition explains the purifying power of the mantra in theological terms. Verse *Adi-lila* 17.22 of *Chaitanya Charitamrita* (Bhaktivedanta, 2012i) declares that in this iron age of Kali, the Hare Krishna *maha-mantra* (great mantra) is an

⁸⁸ Beck (1995, p.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.

⁸⁹ Tambiah (1968, pp.185 to 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” (ibid, p.186).

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,⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹ A comprehensive compilation of Bhaktivedanta’s instructions on the practice of chanting the holy names can be found in *Sri Namamrita* (Bhaktivedanta, 2012j).

T. K. Goswami (2012, pp.177-183), offering a brief overview of the history and meaning of *sankirtan* (congregational chanting), starts his exposition by citing the first of eight verses called *siksastakam*, believed to be Chaitanya’s sole written legacy:

⁹⁰ This is in keeping with Smith’s (2005, p.33) observation that “ritual is, first and foremost a mode of paying attention. Attention is the most fundamental component of ritual”.

⁹¹ 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).

Glory to the Sri Krishna *sankirtan*, which cleanses the heart of all the dust accumulated for years and extinguishes the fire of conditional life of repeated birth and death. This *sankirtan* movement is the prime benediction for humanity at large because it spreads the rays of the benediction moon. It is the life of all transcendental knowledge. It increases the ocean of transcendental bliss and it enables us to fully taste the nectar for which we are always anxious.⁹²

The “theology of the chanting of the holy name” is central to Chaitanya Vaishnavism.

The theology is based on the understanding that Krishna and his name are identical.

To make this point often the following lines from the *Padma Purana* are quoted:⁹³

The holy name of Krishna is transcendently blissful. It bestows all spiritual benedictions, for it is Krishna Himself, the reservoir of all pleasure. Krishna’s name is complete, and it is the form of all transcendental mellows (emotions). It is not a material name under any condition, and it is no less powerful than Krishna Himself.⁹⁴

The followers of Chaitanya place emphasis on chanting the *maha*-(great) *mantra*:

*Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare/Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare.*⁹⁵

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, p.478) notes that *mantra* is used as a tool for meditation and for salvation. Lipner (1994b, p.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

⁹² The *siksastakam* in its entirety is cited in the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, Part 3, Chapter 20 (Bhaktivedanta, 2012i).

⁹³ Puranas are “stories of the ancient past”, a vast body of complex narratives which contain genealogies of deities and kings up to the Guptas, cosmologies, law codes, and descriptions of ritual and pilgrimages to holy places. The *Padma Purana* is one of the eighteen major Puranas, traditionally classified under the *sattva* (purity) category, which contains the Vaishnava Puranas (Flood, 1996, pp.109-110).

⁹⁴ This verse is cited in *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, verse 2.17.133 (Bhaktivedanta, 2012i).

⁹⁵ This mantra is mentioned in the *Brahmanda Purana*, which belongs to the same category of Vaishnava Puranas as the *Padma Purana* (Flood, 1996, pp.109-110).

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 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. It was Bhaktivedanta himself who introduced the "*japa-walk*". Wherever he would be, he would usually make early-morning *japa-walks* a part of his daily health regime. 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, pp.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".⁹⁶

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.

3.1.2. Image Worship

In ISKCON the deity-form is also referred to as *archa-vigraha*. In his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* verse 18.42, Bhaktivedanta notes that: "God has an authorized representation in the deity form, which is called *archa-vigraha*. This *archa-vigraha* is an incarnation of the supreme lord. God will accept service through that form. The Lord is omnipotent, all-powerful; therefore, by his incarnation as *archa-vigraha* He can accept the services of the devotee, just to make it convenient for the man in conditioned life" (Bhaktivedanta, 2012c). Bhaktivedanta's elucidation on the meaning of deity worship reflects the beliefs of Chaitanya Vaishnavas who consider the deity to be an eternal spiritual form of God. The *archa-vigraha*, is the personified representation of the Absolute Truth in stone, wood, or metal. This form of "personhood" is generally alien to the Western ethos. Yet, by hearing the Gaudiya Vaishnava philosophy through the reading of books or attendance of lectures,

⁹⁶ 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, p.180).

individuals entering ISKCON gradually accept the deity as the “Supreme Personality of the Godhead”, and understand it within the framework of the Chaitanya Vaishnava conception of God.

Bhaktivedanta, in his commentary on the eight mantra of *Sri Isopanisad*,⁹⁷ 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, 2012o). 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, 1994b, p.278).

There are two standards for worship of the deity, temple and domestic worship. Deity worship is a practice in which purity and cleanliness are very important. The highest method of worship is maintained in ISKCON temples. Such worship may include two changes of the garments draped over the image, and six to eight food offerings a day. The deity is considered to be the owner and master of the house, and the worship of the deity is central to all the activities in the temple. ISKCON adherents also worship deities at home. This domestic or private worship is often very simple. It may be restricted to one *puja* per day and the offering of food.

⁹⁷ 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, p.36, p.40 and p.75).

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, 1994b, p.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, p.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 programmes, "Food for Life", in many countries.⁹⁸ Individuals also come in contact with ISKCON through vegetarian cooking courses organised in centres all over the world.

⁹⁸ 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, p.47).

According to T. K. Goswami (2012, pp.197-198), *prasadam* became a hallmark of ISKCON's mission and the "secret weapon" in its preaching arsenal. He writes: "ISKCON, a 'kitchen religion', has shaped itself to the cultural landscapes it encounters, from hippie-inspired 'Love Feasts' to the programmatic relief of the destitute (Food for Life) and to a chain of Govinda's restaurants". The distribution of *prasadam* is a familiar daily ritual in many Hindu temples in India. Towards midday, huge quantities of food are cooked, ritually offered to the deity and then distributed as *prasadam* to those present (Lipner, 1994b, p.302).

The prepared food belongs mainly to the category of *sattvik* foods and includes butter, milk, rice, chickpeas, lentils, beans, fruits and vegetables.⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰

All these rule-governed practices are distinctive features of ISKCON, and, as I will argue in the next chapter, are crucial factors that attract newcomers to ISKCON and help socialise them into ISKCON's key values, lifestyles and belief systems. Rituals play a major role in enabling newcomers to reinterpret reality and to adopt new modes of being and understanding. They are crucial to ISKCON's strategies to inculcate its values and beliefs in new entrants.

⁹⁹ *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, 2012c).

¹⁰⁰ 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" (Mans Broo, 2003, p.252).

3.1.3. Scriptural Tradition and the Underlying Belief System

Bhaktisiddhanta explains the main epistemological principles applied in the Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition in the following manner. He asserts that there is a “descending” (*avaroha*) path and an “ascending” (*aroha*) path for attaining knowledge beyond direct human perception. The ascending path refers to theorising, an acquisition of knowledge resulting from rational judgement. The *avaroha* path, according to the tradition, refers to knowledge coming directly from Krishna. Such descending knowledge is understood to be perfect and absolute. In addition, Bhaktisiddhanta claims that the ascending path, which takes the help of logic, reason, and speculation, is ineffective in attempting to comprehend the absolute. Inconceivable (*acintya*) matters, in this view, can only be understood through the descending path of knowledge, which comes down through the guru line and ultimately originates in Krishna (Sherbow, 2004, p.138). By emphasizing that the origin of all knowledge comes from the spiritual world, from Krishna, Bhaktivedanta confirms that ISKCON’s epistemology is based on a theory of divine revelation. In his introduction to *Sri Isopanisad*, Bhaktivedanta Swami maintains that humans have four defects, deficiencies that prevent them from perceiving true reality. They make mistakes, have a propensity to cheat, are always deluded about their true identity, and have imperfect senses (Bhaktivedanta, 2012o).

ISKCON expects newcomers to adopt the belief that ISKCON’s scripturally based theological concepts can only be understood through a descending path of knowledge, a path represented by a succession of spiritual preceptors. The scriptures are assumed to represent *sabda brahman*, a transcendental sound vibration coming from the spiritual realm. It is understood that the scriptures offer infallible knowledge

of Krishna and his material and transcendental energies. At first-contact events, i.e., Sunday temple services or ISKCON outreach programmes, a newcomer hears lectures presented by senior or experienced adherents in which the *avaroha* principle of descending knowledge is emphasized. The way in which the scriptures are presented is a standard procedure applied in all ISKCON temples. In all major ISKCON temples, usually between 7:30 am and 9 am, a lecture is presented on a verse of the *Bhagavata Purana*. The speaker, mostly a member initiated as a Brahmin,¹⁰¹ sits on a *vyasasana*, a raised seat, and recites line by line a Sanskrit verse from the *Bhagavata Purana*. The audience responds by repeating each line of the verse. After that, the speaker reads the word-by-word translation, that is, each word of the Sanskrit verse followed by its English translation. The audience repeats both Sanskrit and English words. The speaker then reads the complete English translation of the entire verse followed by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami's commentary. After this recitation and reading, the Brahmin gives a lecture in which he or she explains the (practical) meaning of the verse and commentary in day-to-day life. The presentation is followed by a question-and-answer session. In the evening, usually from 7:30 p.m. to 8:15 p.m., the same procedure is followed for lectures on the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Novices are encouraged to follow a daily *sadhana*, i.e., a routine of chanting a certain number of Krishna's names, participating in deity worship, and engaging in scriptural study. Neophyte adherents living in ISKCON temples strictly follow all morning and evening lectures. Newcomers living outside are encouraged to follow the same routine at home. Householders and aspiring devotees usually follow the lectures presented in local temples via the Internet.¹⁰² In addition to daily listening to morning and evening lectures, neophytes, as well as long-practising adherents, are

¹⁰¹ For details about Brahmin initiation, see section 3.2 below.

¹⁰² In the UK many adherents follow the lectures presented at the Bhaktivedanta Manor [London (Herts)] via the link: <http://manor.media/home/>; last accessed on 26 June 2015.

recommended to memorise the original Sanskrit and the English translation of key *Bhagavad Gita* verses and to follow scriptural courses to enhance their insight into the scripturally based philosophy. The following standard courses are offered:

1. The Bhakta Course: a seminar instructing neophytes in the basics of Vaishnava theology and correct daily ritual practice. The study includes a basic scriptural understanding of the five main themes of the *Bhagavad Gita*: Krishna (*isvara*), material nature (*prakriti*), the metaphysical self (*jiva*), activities (*karma*), and time (*kala*).
2. The Bhakti-sastri Course: a seminar series (usually three months), mainly focused on the *Bhagavad Gita*.
3. The Bhakti Vaibhava Course: a long-term course (two years) in which the teachings of the first six books of the *Bhagavata Purana* are explained.

ISKCON considers it very important that novices cultivate knowledge of the movement's scriptural tradition. To qualify for initiation, newcomers are required to internalise the basic principles of Chaitanya theology. A brief presentation of ISKCON's core theological principles follows below.

E. B. Rochford (2007, p.10) understands *bhakti-yoga* to be “a devotional form of Hinduism with an emphasis on love and devotional service to God as a means of spiritual salvation”. Gaudiya Vaishnava theology, the Bengali Vaishnava tradition of devotion to Krishna, claims that the practice of *bhakti-yoga* eradicates karma (the good and bad effects) and leads to *moksha* (liberation from *samsara*, the repeated cycle of birth and death). The eradication of karma is a central theological argument that explains the purifying power of the daily ritual practice in ISKCON. Yet, *moksha* or complete purification of the mind of all attachments is not the goal of the ritual

practice. Complete emancipation is considered a stage that the practitioner surpasses when s/he attains *bhakti*, or love of Krishna.

By translating *bhakti* as “devotional service”, Bhaktivedanta laid stress on *bhakti* as an activity. T. K. Goswami (2012, p.158) presents *bhakti* as *abhidheya*,¹⁰³ or activities undertaken with devotion “in relation to Krishna” (*sambandha*),¹⁰⁴ aimed to bring the devotee to the ultimate goal of loving Krishna (*prayojana*). Rupa Goswami, one of the direct followers of Chaitanya, defines *bhakti*, in its purest form, as devotional service devoid of desire for personal enjoyment and satisfaction, and as entirely distinct from the path of non-dualism (*advaita*). In addition, to count as *bhakti*, the practitioner must serve Krishna favourably in the manner that Krishna desires.¹⁰⁵

Central to ISKCON’s theology is the understanding of God as a Supreme Divine Person (*purusottama*) with personal qualities (*saguna*), a Lord, who is the cause of the cosmos, and who reveals himself through sacred scriptures, temple deities, incarnations and gurus. The Gaudiya Vaishnavas, or Chaitanya Vaishnavas, like many other Vaishnava traditions, follow the line of the early second century Bhagavata tradition. Bhagavatas are worshippers of Krishna. The term ‘Bhagavata’ refers to those who follow *bhagavan*, a name indicating a theistic conception and mode of worship of Krishna. Their central text is the *Bhagavad Gita* in which Krishna, Vasudeva, Vishnu or Bhagavan, all referring to the same person, reveals his qualities. Bhaktivedanta’s rendition of the *Bhagavad Gita* emphasises the claim that

¹⁰³ Bhaktivedanta translates *abhidheya* as an “activity in relationship to Krishna”. This translation is found in his commentary on *Chaitanya Charitamrita* 1.7:14 (Bhaktivedanta, 2012i).

¹⁰⁴ Goswami (2012, p.18 and p.213) translates *sambandha* as “relationship in *bhakti*”, the first of three essential phases of practice in Krishna *bhakti*.

¹⁰⁵ This is based on a verse from *Bhakti Rasamrita Sindhu* verse 1.1:11 quoted in *Chaitanya Charitamrita* 2.9:167 (Bhaktivedanta, 2012i).

the Lord is only reached through devotion (*bhakti*), and by divine grace (Flood 1996, pp.117-125).

Sherbow (2004, pp.156-136) explains that the “Gaudiya Vaishnava position is that Krishna is the only enjoyer (*bhokta*) and that all else is to be enjoyed”. This relationship of enjoyer and enjoyed is the eternal relationship between the metaphysical self and Krishna, and is “as natural as that between iron and magnet”. However, every practice performed for personal benefit at the expense of service to guru and Krishna is considered to be impure and to produce negative karma. The daily ritual routine is believed to remove the desire for personal enjoyment from the heart of the practitioner.

3.1.4. The Guru in ISKCON

According to the Chaitanya Vaishnava epistemology, the transfer of knowledge is only realised when both speaker (guru) and hearer (disciple) are qualified. The speaker should only present what he or she has heard from the guru and the authorised scriptures, and the hearer should hear only from gurus in the *parampara*, or the tradition’s succession of spiritual teachers. Additionally, speaker and hearer are qualified only when they abide by “the prescribed initiation vows” (Deadwyler, 2007, pp.108-109). Gurus in ISKCON must command ritual mastery since this is a prerequisite for adherence to one’s initiation vows. The schemes of ritual practice act indirectly as “instruments for knowing and appropriating the world”. In the words of Bell (1992, p.115) “the deployment of the schemes of ritual practice helps to mold dispositions that are effective in the world so experienced”. The coherence believed to exist between the ritual practice, the epistemological approach, and the Krishna conscious worldview is rendered and perceived as redemptive for those empowered

by the schemes of ritual practice. For the practitioner, the daily ritual practice helps to create the experience of the Chaitanya Vaishnava worldview as outlined and explained by the scriptures and the guru and within the parameters set by the social and institutional structure of ISKCON.

B. K. Smith, in his study of initiation and Vedic study in ancient India, points out that it is the guru who drapes the sacred thread (*yajnopavita*) over the initiate's left shoulder and under his right arm during the initiation ceremony (Smith, 1986, pp.65-89). In Hindu traditions surrender to a guru has almost always been a prerequisite for initiation.¹⁰⁶ This is certainly the case in ISKCON.

The guru in Chaitanya Vaishnavism, in theological terms, is the “transparent” medium through which a disciple receives access to a “spiritual” realm. The meaning of “transparent”, as clarified by Goswami (2012, p.115), indicates that the guru repeats the predecessor's message, understood to be a divine message from Krishna, without alteration, thus enabling a channelling which Bhaktivedanta refers to as “the mystery of the disciplic succession”. Visvanatha Chakravarti,¹⁰⁷ a guru in the line of ISKCON's disciplic succession of spiritual teachers explains this in *Gurvastaka*, a song praising the activities of a Vaishnava guru. The last verse of the song states “by the grace of the guru one obtains the grace of God, and if one does not have grace of the guru, no spiritual progress can be accomplished” (Sherbow, 2004, p.138).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ In many Indian traditions, and even Hindu-inspired meditation movements such as Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) and Siddha Yoga, the guru-disciple relationship is foundational (Williamson 2010, p.135).

¹⁰⁷ Visvanatha Chakravarti was a famous Gaudiya Vaishnava guru who during the seventeenth century produced commentaries on *Bhagavad Gita* and *Bhagavata Purana* (Goswami, 2012, p.117).

¹⁰⁸ For a detailed analysis of the guru in the Chaitanya *bhakti* tradition see Broo (2003). Other scholars, such as Deadwyler (2004), Judah (1974), Knott (1986), Rochford (1985, 2007), and Shinn (1987) have also contributed to the research on the role of the guru in ISKCON and Chaitanya Vaishnavism.

It is the tradition's understanding that it is only by serving a Vaishnava guru in the line of precedent preceptors that a sincere disciple can gain entry into the spiritual realm, realise his or her individual metaphysical reality, and enter into one of the four relationships to God: (1) servitorship (*dasya*); (2) friendship (*sakhya*); (3) parenthood (*vatsalya*); or (4) conjugal love (*madhurya*). An inherent attribute of the metaphysical self is eternal consciousness, which continues to exist after death. The guru serves as a mediator between the worldly realm and the transcendental metaphysical worlds (Sardella, 2013, pp.118-141).

In ISKCON the relationship of a disciple with an ISKCON guru is subordinate to the relationship with Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada who is considered to be the Founder-*acharya*, or the guru who has set the standards of regulated practice and institutionalised behaviour for ISKCON adherents. Therefore, newcomers are advised to first become acquainted with the teachings of Bhaktivedanta and cultivate a good understanding of the philosophical basis supporting the ritual practice, and become familiar with the core elements of ISKCON's mission. Candidate initiates are encouraged to take guidance from many instructing spiritual masters, or *siksha-gurus* serving in ISKCON. The spiritual master who gives initiation (*diksha*) to a disciple connects the initiate officially with Krishna through the disciplic succession of spiritual masters (*guru parampara*). While one can have only one *diksha-guru*, one can have many *siksha-gurus*, or spiritual masters who deliver spiritual instructions. The *diksha-guru* retains a unique position because of his role in imparting the *mantra* to the disciple at the time of the initiation-ceremony.

Initiation in Chaitanya Vaishnava traditions always entails the transmission of a mantra from guru to disciple. The imparted *mantra* refers to Krishna's names for

first initiates, and the *gayatri* mantra for Brahmin initiates.¹⁰⁹ The guru explains the mantra to the initiate. Jiva Goswami, one of the followers of Chaitanya, explains initiation in the following way. Commenting on a verse of *Hari-bhakti-vilasa* – “Since from it divine knowledge is given and the destruction of sin is effected, it is called initiation by teachers, knowers of the truth” – Jiva Goswami explains: “The words ‘divine knowledge’ here refer to knowledge of the form of the Lord in the holy mantra, and knowledge of the specific relationship with the Lord...” (Broo, 2003, pp.210-211).¹¹⁰ Therefore, during the initiation ceremony the guru delivers a sermon on the cultivation of inner attitudes appropriate for effective chanting. The guidance of the disciples in cultivating knowledge required to effectively practice the daily rituals is a core function of the guru in Chaitanya Vaishnavism. Especially the *harinama-diksha*, or first initiation, focuses on the practice of chanting. Second initiation, on the other hand, is concerned with the development of the qualities of a Brahmin.¹¹¹

The relationship between guru and disciple is governed by detailed rules, regulations and etiquette, and is characterized by the following features. Disciples and aspiring disciples often attend lectures of the guru and have opportunities to participate in guru-led *kirtans*, ask questions, worship the deity in the guru’s presence, and eat with the guru. Often the guru organises disciple meetings, which are private meetings (*darsans*) in which the disciples can ask questions concerning their personal lives. During such meetings, a feeling of togetherness can develop between those who

¹⁰⁹ The *gayatri* mantra is one of the most symbolic and sacred mantras of Brahminic Hinduism. Brahmins chant *gayatri* in the early morning, at noontime and at sunset, facing the sun and reciting the mantra while holding their sacred threads (Lipner, 1994b, p.53 and p.72).

¹¹⁰ *Hari-bhakti-vilasa* contains the ritual and devotional practices to be followed by Chaitanya Vaishnavas. The work contains twenty chapters of codified instructions written by Sanatana Goswami and Gopala Bhatta Goswami, followers of Chaitanya (Bhaktivedanta, 2012a).

¹¹¹ *Bhagavad-gita* verse 18.42 lists the following qualities for Brahmins: peacefulness, self-control, austerity, purity, tolerance, honesty, knowledge, wisdom and religiousness. (Bhaktivedanta, 2012c).

have accepted the same guru. Disciples also invite the guru to their home and offer him or her meals or other forms of hospitality.

The relationship between the disciple and the guru is one of friendship and respect. The disciple always remains conscious that the guru is “as good as God” and avoids becoming too familiar with the guru.¹¹² In all ISKCON temples, during *mangala arotika*, the early morning worship of the deities, the devotees sing *Gurv-astaka*, an eight-verse song written by Visvanatha Chakravarti that praises the qualities of the spiritual master. Its seventh verse explains the reasons why the guru is accepted as God himself: *saksad-dharitvena samasta-sastrair/uktas tatha bhavyata eva sadbhih/ kintu prabhor yah priya eva tasya*, which means “the spiritual master is to be honoured as much as the Supreme Lord, because he is the most confidential servitor of the Lord” (Bhaktivedanta, 2012q).

Every year the disciples also celebrate *vyasa-puja*, a ceremony held on the birth anniversary of the spiritual master, an event which is meant to honour the spiritual master as the embodiment of the knowledge handed down by a succession of previous gurus. This is done in a private gathering of godbrothers and -sisters (disciples of the same spiritual master), an occasion in which disciples read written offerings glorifying the spiritual master, who if not present, is represented by an image.¹¹³ After the reading, the disciples enjoy a festive meal of *prasadam* (sanctified food). Besides this yearly event, the disciples (and aspiring disciples) pay their respects to the guru in a daily ceremony called *guru puja*, a ritual in which the disciple offers various articles such as incense, flowers, ghee lamps, water, handkerchief, etc.

¹¹² Bhaktivedanta writes in his commentary to verse 2.12.212 of the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*: “...it is said, familiarity breeds contempt. Sometimes coming too near to the Deity or the spiritual master degrades the neophyte devotee. Personal servants of the Deity and the spiritual master should therefore always be very careful, for negligence may overcome them in their duty” (Bhaktivedanta, 2012i).

¹¹³ Broo (2003, p. 250) offers deeper insights into the history and beliefs of the worship of the guru in an image form.

before an image of the spiritual master. This is done while chanting *Guru-vandana*, a song praising the spiritual master. In all ISKCON temples a similar *guru-puja* ceremony is conducted every morning to praise Prabhupada (Bhaktivedanta). This *Prabhupada guru-puja* is offered to a deity of Prabhupada in the temple room. King describes the practice of *guru-puja* as follows:

At 7.00 a.m. the deities are greeted. Following this devotees at 7.10 a.m. gather before Prabhupada's seat of honour (*vyasana*) and observe worship of the guru (*guru puja*) while one devotee performs *arati* to the sculpted image of Prabhupada, others offer flowers, and perform *kirtan* – responsive singing of a Bengali song by Narottama Das Thakura, a 16-17 century Gaudiya Vaishnava saint, *Sri Guru-vandana* (Prayer to the Guru) from *Prema-bhakti-candrika* (King, 2007, p.152).

The construction of the faith-building environment combines social, epistemological, and experiential dimensions. The novice comes in contact with a community of ISKCON adherents with a shared belief in the powers of the rites elaborated in the scriptures, and who make these ritual orientations and beliefs appear to be a “credible understanding of the true nature of things”.¹¹⁴ The neophyte, surrounded by a social network of people sharing these beliefs and influenced by the scriptural learning, gradually accepts the presumed effects of the recommended ritual performance as true.

With faith derived from these sources, the individual practising the daily rites experiences results that reflect a certain degree of efficacy as predicted by the guru and the Vaishnava scriptures. These experiences in turn strengthen his or her faith in the scriptures, in the guru, and in ISKCON's guidelines for ritual practice. A critical relationship is thus established between ritual, the community of devotees, ISKCON gurus, the institution, and the neophyte, all supported by the teachings in the scriptures

¹¹⁴ Berger (1967, pp.45-51) calls this the “plausibility system” based on “a network of people who share their beliefs and make them appear to be a credible understanding of the true nature of things”.

promoted by generations of gurus. In addition, the practice of the daily rites serves to generate a sense of belonging creating a communal and social identity within the institution.

3.1.5. The Importance of ISKCON Temples and Preaching Centres

For ISKCON members, the local temple or preaching centre is the hub of all social activities and religious worship. Every Sunday, congregational members come together for the Sunday Feast programme and engage in chanting Krishna's names, hearing scriptural presentations, and eat *prasadam*. The temple is the setting where the congregation celebrates festivals and where visiting *gurus*, *sannyasis*, and respected senior adherents present lectures, seminars, courses, and offer mentorship. Within the temple compound, the temple room is the most sacred, for it is within that space that every early morning ISKCON followers gather together to worship the deities, chant meditatively, and hear from the sacred scriptures. Due to the presence of the images and the performance of devotional ritual activities, the temple room is sacralised and set apart. Traditionally, the beautifully adorned deities are placed on one side of the temple room and an image of Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada on the other. To the left of the shrine are kept the *puja* paraphernalia, including a conch shell and a whisk (for fanning the deities).

Adherents often create their own sacred ritual space in their private homes. Most devotee families maintain a 'temple room', a room reserved for deity worship, chanting *japa*, and hearing or reading scripture. Some families organise weekly outreach programmes and invite people to join such activities (and eat *prasadam* together). The temple room, always kept clean, decorated with flowers, and perfumed with incense, is solely reserved for performing sacred ritual activities. The room is

often decorated with beautiful paintings that depict passages from the *Bhagavata Purana* or *Bhagavad Gita*.

3.2. ISKCON's Social Structure

Newcomers in ISKCON slowly integrate into ISKCON's social structure. From the moment a new entrant commits to qualifying for initiation, he or she receives the title *bhakta* (male) or *bhaktin* (female). The novice then moves up the hierarchy by qualifying for different levels of initiation. Such progression is closely monitored by different authority figures according to institutionalised procedures. In the next chapters ISKCON's institutional dynamics of social control will be analysed in depth. The following section explains ISKCON's three successive initiation levels.

In present-day ISKCON, three levels of initiation ceremonies are held. Each of the initiation rites are levels of "rites of passage" representing the leaving behind of a former status of life and the incorporation into different social levels of the community. The first level is *harinama* or "first initiation", the second level is "Brahmin initiation" or "second initiation", and the third level, which is infrequently applied, is "*sannyasa* initiation". First initiation represents the end of novitiate and the incorporation of the novice into the community of ISKCON devotees. The second initiation celebrates the incorporation into the circle of Brahmin priests, and the third level stands for entrance into the renouncer's way of life, *sannyasa*, detached from all worldly ties and duties. Each level of initiation ceremony is an official confirmation, socially recognised by others, of the individual acquiring a new social identity. While traditionally the *sannyasi* renounces all sense of social identity and community, within the Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition the *sannyasi* is recognised as a travelling preacher detached from worldly concerns. What follows is a systematic presentation of the

characteristics of each level of incorporation rites.

ISKCON's initiation rituals represent phases in a journey of a gradually-awakening awareness of the eternal life of the metaphysical self, guided by a guru representing a traditional line of spiritual preceptors. The ability to discriminate between one's "true" self and one's "false" sense of social, physical and worldly identity is believed to develop through a progressive transformative purification of consciousness. The false worldly consciousness manifests in the form of one's attachments to body, home, property, children, relatives and wealth; bonds which the worldly self perceives in terms of "I and mine". The transformative purification is attained by diluting these attachments through engagement in devotional (ritually organised) Krishna activities [*Bhagavata Purana* 1.2.37 and 5.5.8] (Bhaktivedanta, 2012m).

For receiving the second, or *brahminical* initiation, which offers the individual the possibility to become an altar priest and worship the deities in ISKCON temples, there is again a one-year waiting period starting from the date of first initiation. To qualify for the second initiation one must have adhered strictly to the vows the person made during the first initiation. In addition, the individual must have regularly attended the morning temple programmes, either at home or in the local temple. Despite ISKCON Law 7.2.2.1.3 stating that it is the responsibility of the initiating *guru* to determine the fitness of his disciple for *brahminical* initiation, the *guru* will need again to receive a recommendation from the local ISKCON authority where the person serves before offering the disciple second initiation.¹¹⁵ Adherents

¹¹⁵ On 7 October 2013, the European ISKCON Regional Governing Body decided that, before issuing a letter of recommendation, local authorities in Europe must certify that the candidate for second initiation has passed *Bhakti Sastri* examinations. Such assessment is meant to ensure that the candidate for Brahmin initiation has a basic understanding of Bhaktivedanta's teachings, especially regarding the study of the *Bhagavad Gita*. This resolution can be viewed on: <http://eurorgb.com/euro-rgb-meeting->

who live and serve in ISKCON are allowed to take initiation only from gurus officially approved by ISKCON GBC. Individuals who have received initiation from non-ISKCON Vaishnava gurus are in principle not allowed to serve in ISKCON.

Disciples receiving second initiation often share the *homa* with first initiates.¹¹⁶ After the ceremony the guru, in private, offers the *yajnopavita* (sacred thread) to male disciples and chants the *gayatri*-mantra, a sacred mantra that Brahmins chant silently three times a day at sunrise, noon and sunset to attain transcendence, in the right ear of the male disciple and the left ear of the female disciple (Broo, 2003, p.163).¹¹⁷ It is a mantra understood to have the power to deliver one from material entanglement (Bhaktivedanta, 2012a).

Only devotees initiated into brahminhood are allowed to cook for the deity and serve at the altar. Van Gennep (1960, p.177) argues that rites of initiation often aim at securing permanent rights for the individual. In the context of second initiation in ISKCON, the initiate secures the “right” to perform the ritual worship of Krishna’s deity forms. Candidates for Brahmin initiation usually engage in the study of the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Bhagavata Purana*, and learn to read and pronounce Sanskrit. Brahmins are generally encouraged to take up priestly roles, and engage in educational services. It is therefore not surprising that the second initiation ceremony is often described as ordination into priesthood.

[radhadesh-october-7-2013](#), last accessed on 6 April 2015. The *Bhakti Sastri* course and examinations can be followed as a distance learning course: <http://www.bhaktivedantaonline.com>, last accessed on 6 April 2015.

¹¹⁶ Van Gennep (1960, p.106) specifies that Brahmin ceremonies “include, first a tonsure, a bath, a change of clothing”. In ISKCON this is not only applied for Brahmin *diksha* but also for *harinama* or first initiation.

¹¹⁷ The ceremony of *diksha* or second initiation in ISKCON reflects many elements contained in traditional Brahmin ceremonies, including the individual becoming subject to a range of taboos, the recitation of the *gayatri* mantra, and the conducting of a *homa* fire sacrifice.

In the case of *sannyasa* initiation it is up to the initiating guru (*sannyasa guru*) to change the name of the initiate or to keep the name but replace the suffix “dasa” with the title “Swami”. *Sannyasa* initiates sometimes receive a new name beginning with “Bhakti” and ending with “Swami”. As such the name is often indicative of the adherent’s social position and ranking in the ISKCON hierarchy. Brahmin or twice-initiated members who are householders sometimes add the title “Adhikara” to their name to indicate their Brahmin status and their dedication to ISKCON’s mission. Celibate monks often add the title “Brahmacari” to their name to indicate their celibate status.

An in-depth understanding of the position of a Brahmin or a *sannyasa* initiate (*sannyasi*) within ISKCON’s social hierarchy requires an insight into the traditional system of four *ashramas*. The social structure of ISKCON, founded by Bhaktivedanta in New York in 1965, was supported by a social hierarchy related to the system of the four *ashramas*, or the four stages of life, which have been part of the Hindu social order at least since the fifth century BCE (Flood, 1996, p.62). The first stage of life is that of the *brahmacari* or celibate student. In early traditions, boys were sent to a teacher to be trained in the duties and responsibilities of their *ashramas*.¹¹⁸ According to the *Manu-smriti*,¹¹⁹ this period of study could be extended up to the age of thirty-six. According to the *Dharma-Sutras*,¹²⁰ a student has, after the completion of the studies, the choice either to remain a celibate student, or to enter the second ashrama, *grihastha* (the life of the householder), marked by marriage, parenting, and

¹¹⁸ It is important to note that though the *ashram* system traditionally applied to twice-born (upper-caste) males only, in the ISKCON context much of it applies to both men and women, and those from diverse backgrounds.

¹¹⁹ This refers to the “Laws of Manu”, a text which is part of the *smriti* literature, or the scriptures supplementary to the *sruti*, the original Vedic scriptures (the Vedas and Upanisads). The *Manava Dharma Sastra*, sometimes referred to as the *Manu-smriti*, or Law, or Code or Instructions of Manu, was composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE (Lipner, 1994b, p.83).

¹²⁰ *The Dharma-sutras* develop material found in the *Griha-sutras* and are concerned with social customs and human conduct. The most important of the *Dharma-sutras* are ascribed to the sages Gautama, Baudhayana, Vasistha and Apastamba, whose texts contain rules for domestic rites, jurisprudence, and rules pertaining to the four stages of life (*ashram*) (Lipner, 1994b, p.53).

supporting a family. Most ISKCON members today, men and women, having joined the movement in their twenties or thirties, do not receive any long-term *brahmacari* training before entering household life. However, today's ritual environment is different from that in the 1970s. As noted previously in Chapter One in the late 1960s and early 1970s, joining ISKCON meant to live in a temple community, and engage in daily ritual practice in an exclusive religious world. All new recruits entered a temple community and received *brahmacari* training from a guru. From the early 1980s onwards, celibates started moving out of the temples to marry and form families, and the culture of temple life declined. In today's ISKCON recruits are generally trained within a congregational environment. They learn the daily rituals and the multitude of rules and regulations required for mastering the daily rites during weekly gatherings and Sunday feast programmes. New recruits, becoming gradually acquainted with the culture of ritual practice, are accepted as novices when they start demonstrating a certain level of ritual proficiency. An indispensable factor in enabling solidarity within the organisation is the ritual practice as that is the common thing all ISKCON adherents do. This ritual practice in turn "generates an experience of a higher spiritual authority as an internalised reality" (Bell, 1992, p.102).

If and when their training is completed, young entrants have the choice either to remain a celibate *brahmacari* or to become a householder. The *vivaha-samskara*, or wedding ceremony in ISKCON is generally reserved for initiates and, exceptionally, long practising novices. During the marriage ceremony husband and wife vow to support each other's "spiritual practice", to maintain their initiation vows, and educate their children in devotional practice. Householders train their children in ritual application from a very young age.

According to the classical traditions, one could remain a householder or *grihasta* until one had grandchildren. After that, it was time to take up *vanaprastha*, the life of a forest dweller, thus withdrawing from everyday society and its worldly concerns. This, according to the tradition, meant retiring from family duties, leaving home, and engaging in *tapasya*, or austerities to generate spiritual energy. In that stage of life the wife and husband could stay together. However, staying together was not allowed in the fourth stage, the *sannyasa* ashram or renounced stage of life. The *vanaprastha* and *sannyasa* stages are rarely adopted in ISKCON. However, ISKCON has adherents who embrace *sannyasa* in a different sense. The *sannyasi* is a travelling ISKCON preacher who dedicates all his energy to the preaching mission. In May 2015, ISKCON had ninety-nine *sannyasis*. For householders to take *sannyasa* – something that is and has been very exceptional – requires, besides a GBC-instituted selection procedure, the wife’s permission, for it means ultimate separation. *Sannyasa* in ISKCON is not open to both sexes but is instead restricted to men.

ISKCON’s organisational structure and hierarchy is complex. The movement is governed by a system of parallel lines of authority. First, there is the authority of the Governing Body Commission (GBC) representing an organisational hierarchy based on the governing principles outlined by ISKCON Law, and second, there are ISKCON gurus representing spiritual authority mainly guided by Chaitanya Vaishnava theological principles. Both lines of authority, managerial and spiritual, are bound to cooperate and act according to rules and guidelines established by the GBC. Bhaktivedanta established the GBC as an overarching authority under which gurus must function to create a system of checks and balances.¹²¹ While newcomers gradually become acquainted with ISKCON’s authority structure, it is only during the

¹²¹ Goswami (2012, p.176) points out that the overriding managerial authority of the GBC could be seen as an “institutional intrusion into the spiritual line”, especially when compared with Bhaktivedanta’s previous textual commentaries in which he stressed the authority of the guru.

transition period that individuals become intensely personally affected by it. The reason for this is that novices require following rigid institutionally-controlled procedures for attaining eligibility for undergoing the initiation rituals. Entering ISKCON's social structure and the following of entry-procedures is preceded by a process of coming in contact with the daily rituals and internalizing its underlying beliefs. A study of the interview accounts helps identifying the particular dynamics of this process. The next section presents the accounts of two interviews, each representing a slightly different mode of entry.

3.3. Interview Accounts – Patterns of Conversion

Caroline's story represents the first of two patterns of 'conversion' into ISKCON – here the entry is gradual, and is guided by increasing levels of social interaction with ISKCON adherents. Twenty-eight cases out of forty show patterns that, although not identical, are close to Caroline's model.

Caroline (Swiss, aged 38) was in her mid-twenties and was studying law at a university in Switzerland.¹²² 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).¹²³ 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

¹²² Interviewed on December 4, 2011.

¹²³ 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.

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.¹²⁴

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 simply in terms of the purifying nature of the ritual.¹²⁵ 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.

¹²⁴ As outlined previously, books are often one of the first items of newcomers' contact with ISKCON. Caroline read them and became intrigued by the philosophy.

¹²⁵ 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, pp.93-96) claims that the Tenrikyo cleaning rite also serves to generate a sense of community.

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, 2012i).

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.¹²⁶ 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:

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.¹²⁷

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, as noted in Chapter 3, 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.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ *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).

¹²⁷ Interviewed on December 4, 2011.

¹²⁸ Bell (1992, p.107) uses the term "ritual mastery" to indicate that ritual can only exist in "specific cultural schemes and strategies for ritualisation". Bourdieu (1977, pp.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".

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 (2012m) 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.¹²⁹ 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

¹²⁹ 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.

development 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,¹³⁰ 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. 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 involving intensive association with senior ISKCON teachers and the establishing of a relationship with an ISKCON guru.

¹³⁰ 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.

The most common pattern is that individuals,¹³¹ as represented by the story of Caroline, is introduced into the practice by a gradual process of socialisation which intensifies over time.¹³² The first stage is characterized by the development of regular social interaction. This phase generally goes hand in hand with key features crucial to social experience in ISKCON and are often related to the first contact with, and learning of, the rites. They may include weekly attendance at Sunday programmes in local ISKCON temples, exposure to books, and the establishment of affective bonds with ISKCON adherents. The socialisation grows in intensity and is complemented by the steady practice of daily rituals. The interaction with ISKCON adherents becomes more intense, as the entrant engages with courses and seminars, makes frequent visits to temples, to local preaching centres, or to the private homes of ISKCON adherents. The intensified socialisation then generally leads, within a few weeks or months, to the second stage. This phase usually starts with a commitment, such as the individual's decision to surrender to an ISKCON guru, to apply for initiation, to adopt a monastic way of life, and/or to perform the daily rites. The second phase is thus marked by the individual making a lifetime commitment to the ritual practice in association with other ISKCON adherents, embracing discipleship under the chosen guru, and adhering to institutionally defined rules to attain eligibility to undergo the initiation rituals.

The second, less frequent model of socialisation is characterized by a pattern which begins with a period of acute and intense socialisation, an initial stage that usually facilitates a relatively rapid entry into ISKCON. More specifically, there is a short period of introduction which generally starts with visiting an ISKCON temple or

¹³¹ Twenty-eight cases seem to be aligning with the first pattern, twelve with the second, a more rapid model of entry.

¹³² On the basis of interview data collected between 1980 and 1984 in North America, Shinn (1989) identified two similar forms of entry into ISKCON; a less frequent rapid model of entry, and the more common gradual model of entry.

attending regular ISKCON programmes, festivals or other events during which an individual comes in contact with ISKCON's ritual practice. The individual is quickly introduced to the rites, beliefs and practices through a process of intense social interaction. Soon, after a few months, the individual commits to join the local community and/or to follow the institutionalised procedure to apply for initiation. Ben's story represents an example of this type of rapid journey into ISKCON. Twelve out of the forty interviewees narrated stories demonstrating patterns that are in line with or close to Ben's model.

Ben (Australian, aged 60, and an ISKCON devotee for over forty years),¹³³ at that time aged 24, joined ISKCON in 1974 in Melbourne, Australia. While Ben's entry story unfolded in Australia, in the early eighties he married an English ISKCON devotee and moved to England. When Ben graduated at the end of 1971 and received a Bachelor's Degree in Dramatic Arts and in English Literature, he was very passionately pursuing his career as a professional actor. In 1972, 1973 and 1974 he worked nonstop in theatre and television. After his university studies (1971-1974) Ben worked at a theatre in Adelaide. In 1974 Ben moved from Adelaide to Melbourne where he got a job as an actor in a play for television. Through much of 1974, at the age of 23-24, he worked for television and for stage shows simultaneously. One day, Ben went to a theosophical bookshop with a shopping bag, and bought a number of books. The following is an excerpt of the interview in which Ben explains how, after leaving the theosophical bookshop, he came in contact with a Hare Krishna devotee and got a copy of two parts of the first book of the *Bhagavata Purana*:

I was standing in the street with the books I bought. At that instant a girl appeared next to me. She looked in my bag and said: "Oh, you have a lot of books there". She pulled out a book from her bag and she was holding it before me in such a way that I

¹³³ Interviewed on May 26, 2012.

could see the pictures on the cover. The backdrop of the book was the blue sky itself and within it I could see shining planets. Suddenly it was like a psychedelic experience. When I focused on the book I saw two amazing beautiful personalities standing within the centre of a lotus flower, colourfully painted within the central planet. The way my senses were affected by this experience was that suddenly I had the sensation that I was looking into a separate reality.¹³⁴

When he got home, Ben threw all the books on his bed and the first book of the *Bhagavata Purana*, which followers of the Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition call the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, landed on top of all the other books. When Ben started reading the introduction, two statements penetrated him to core. After reading a few pages he had to sit quietly for a long time, because he knew what the statements he had just read were true. These statements were: “Disparity in human society is due to lack of religious principles in a Godless civilization” and “There is God, the almighty one”. Ben’s reading brought him in contact with the fundamental concepts of Chaitanya Vaishnavism. It initiated a process of engagement with the theories of karma, rebirth, the existence of an eternal metaphysical self, etc.

Over the next few weeks, Ben faced an internal struggle as to whether or not to go down to the Hare Krishna temple and meet people living in accordance with the values set out in the books. Finally the urge to go to the temple was just irresistible. Ben’s first visit to the Melbourne temple parallels Caroline’s early visits to the Zurich temple. With a copy of *Bhagavad-gita* in her hand, Caroline knocked at the door of the Zurich temple to ask for further clarification on how to live the teachings. Ben’s inquisitiveness led to the following experience. The first time he went to the temple it was about four o’clock in the afternoon. When he entered the temple a devotee all of a sudden said: “Take your shoes off!” So Ben took his shoes off and went inside the temple. The devotee then gave Ben a folder with copies of the ISKCON journal *Back*

¹³⁴ Interviewed on May 26, 2012.

to *Godhead* (henceforth BTG) and went off to do something else. For one hour Ben became absorbed in looking through the BTG volumes. Then another devotee came and offered Ben some fruits, *prasadam* from the afternoon offering to the deities, and told him that at half past six he could take an evening meal with the devotees. Then just before the meal Haricandra Das, a leading devotee in the temple, came to see Ben and befriended him, sat him down and started to answer him questions. At the Sunday feast, which Ben found “fabulous”, the devotees told him that they had a programme every morning starting at 4:30 am, and if he liked he could also come to that. So, next morning Ben went to the temple and attended for the first time the *mangala arotika* early morning programme, which starts with greeting the deities and singing *Gurvastakam*, a prayer glorifying the qualities of a Vaishnava *guru*. Immediately after the *mangala arotika* the devotees gave Ben some *japa*-beads (chanting beads) and they told him how to chant the mantra on each bead. Ben chanted this first morning ten rounds of hundred and eight Hare Krishna mantras, and he found the experience to be wonderful. Then, at 7:15 am, the time came to greet the deities for the second time. After the greeting of the deities Ben attended *guru puja*, a ceremony honouring the spiritual master. Then he heard a *Srimad Bhagavatam* class, a lecture and discussion on the verses of the *Bhagavata Purana* and the respective commentaries of the ChaitanyaVaishnava predecessor gurus. After the class, at 9 am, Ben took breakfast with the devotees.

That morning experience in October 1974 sealed Ben’s faith. After that, every morning, he would go to the temple. Ben was living quite a distance away from the temple, because he lived near the studio where he was working. The devotees told him that they routinely got up early, had a cold shower, and then attended the *mangala-arotika* at 4:30 am. So, Ben started to get up at 3 to 3:30 am in the morning, have a cold shower, call a taxi and go to the temple and spend time there until 9 am in

the morning. Then he would leave for the TV show and continue to work in the evening from 7 pm to midnight, sleeping three to five hours at most each night. But he never felt fatigued and could not get enough of this new experience. He would even go to the temple between the first (recording) call and the next. That went on for three months, October, November and December 1974. The three months of early morning ritual practice combined with daily discussions on Chaitanya Vaishnava philosophy during the discussions of the verses of the *Bhagavata Purana* convinced Ben to accept the principles of pollution and purity prescribed by the beliefs and subsequently to adhere strictly to the prohibitions and the chanting. At the end of the quarter, Ben accepted the tradition's theological principles as the highest universally applicable knowledge.

By the end of December the first eighteen episodes for the TV show had been shot, so there was a two and a half month lay-off. At that time, Ben told the head of production that he would not continue anymore and that he was going to become a monk. On New Year's day, 1975, he moved into the temple and shaved his head. A few months later, on recommendation of the ISKCON Melbourne Temple President, he received initiation from Bhaktivedanta Swami.¹³⁵

Ben's entry story, when compared to Caroline's entry story with its long phase of initial searching, is ultra-short. After attendance at a Sunday feast programme, Ben plunged directly into a scheme of daily ritual practice marked by intense social interaction with ISKCON adherents. Caroline attained that same stage only some years after her initial contact with ISKCON, when she went back to Vrindavana to

¹³⁵ During the early 1970s the requirements for initiation into ISKCON were not as complex as they are today. A recommendation from the Temple President was sufficient.

study Vaishnava scriptures, and began to engage intensively with senior ISKCON teachers and their teachings. In both cases, the phase that then followed is a continuation of the socialisation process characterized by the commitment to become an initiated member.

In summary, there are two models of making initial contact with ISKCON, and socializing with ISKCON members – one slow and gradual, and the other much more rapid. The two models together cover nearly all the interview cases. However, regardless of whether the initial contact and socialisation is slow or fast, interviewee narratives indicate that thereafter, the process of transition tends to be similar.

The interview accounts of Caroline and Ben contain similarities. For instance, they both show that social bonding with ISKCON members is a crucial element that influences their decision to enter ISKCON, a bonding which has to be sustained over a significant period of time. The environment in which socialisation develops is ritual activity, i.e., chanting, attending puja ceremonies, preparing and consuming *prasadam*, and distributing books. Socialisation within such a structured environment, sustained by participation in ritual, leads to a form of seeking, or questing. Crucial to this seekership is that newcomers study the scriptures and are guided by ISKCON gurus. Within that process of seeking and becoming an initiated adherent, attachment to ISKCON gurus is essential.

The first section of this chapter analyzed ISKCON's daily practice and the structured environment wherein it is experienced. The last section looked at how the experience of this environment leads entrants to decide to enter ISKCON, an experience entailing a process of ritualisation, a setting apart of an individual from his or her former environment and a gradual integration into the ISKCON milieu. The

chapters to follow examine how individuals become immersed into the newly ritual dominated environment. Crucial elements within that multi-staged process are the employment of schemes of ritualisation, the role of ritual specialist and the agency of individuals expressed through a growing sense of seekership and commitment. These chapters demonstrate that there are indispensable links between the shaping of the identity of the entrant, the ritual practice, its ritualized structured environment, and the individual's incorporation into the ISKCON community.

Chapter Four: Schemes of Ritualisation and Entry into ISKCON

Following the introduction to ISKCON's ritual history (Chapter 2) and contemporary practice (Chapter 3), this chapter will now examine the process of entry into ISKCON in terms of the schemes of ritualisation into which entrants are drawn. Using A. Van Gennep's theory on rites of passage, I will first discuss the entry process in general terms, examining how this can be understood using Van Gennep's three stages of separation, liminality and incorporation as they apply to ISKCON. Following this, I will examine how the stages appear if we examine the actual narratives of long-term devotees. It becomes clear from this narrative analysis that though individual patterns and experiences of entering ISKCON vary considerably, they can still be framed using the three-stage model outlined by van Gennep. The stages, however, tend to blur into one another in these accounts, and are not always clearly separable.

Based on the analysis of my interview data, I will argue in this chapter that "ritualisation" is an indispensable and pivotal factor influencing entry into ISKCON. This argument has two dimensions. First, I will demonstrate that ritual action in the ISKCON context is a form of social control. It sets the individual apart through facilitating incorporation and social solidarity, causing alienation from extra-communal circles, and encouraging adherence to social and hierarchical structures. Second, I will show how ritual practice enables the internalisation of beliefs/worldviews and transforms the individual's social identity. Central to the discussions in this chapter are the points outlined below, derived from Catherine Bell's study on ritualisation.

Bell (1992, pp.125-130) looks at ritualisation as a strategic and effective means of social control.¹³⁶ She addresses a large body of theories regarding ritual as a form of social control and relates ritualisation to belief, ideology, legitimation and power. Her exploration gives an insight into how ritual action negotiates authority, self and society, and is helpful in understanding the social dynamics of ritual practice and its manipulative powers. Bell attempts to answer the question “how does ritual do what we say it does?” and concludes that “ritual functions as an instrument of social control”. In her view, ritualisation is a strategic arena for the embodiment of power relations (ibid, pp.168-272). Moreover, she maintains that ritual practice does not function to regulate or control the system of social relations but that they are the system. She argues that ritualisation, when analysed, emerges as “a particular cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and rooted in a distinctive interplay between a socialised body and the environment it structures” (ibid, p.7).

Bell asserts that ritual activities constantly differentiate, integrate, and establish the field of social relations. She declares that ritualisation is a social strategy that can differentiate between particular individuals/communities and can also work to integrate them. Ritualisation works by producing sets of oppositions. While horizontal oppositions (between social equals) may cause alienation between ritualised and non-ritualised persons, vertical (hierarchical) oppositions may cause relations of superiority and inferiority among persons ritualised to different degrees. Bell asserts that ritual actions are, as a strategy, a functional mechanism in the service of social solidarity, and that, as a strategic embodiment of schemes of power relationships that hierarchise, integrate, define or obscure – ritualisation can promote social solidarity (ibid, p.216). Using this framework, this chapter argues that issues of social control, in

¹³⁶ C. Bell derived the idea of ritualisation as a strategic activity mainly from Foucault, Comaroff (1997; 1991) and Bourdieu (1992; 1977; 1977b), which works provide a useful basis for describing ritualisation as strategic social activity and socialisation (Bell, 1992, p.97).

particular with regard to separation from former circles and integration into the ISKCON community, are critical to entry into ISKCON.

The goal of ritual as a strategic way of acting, Bell concludes, is the ritualisation of social agents. Ritualisation endows agents with some degree of “ritual mastery”, which she defines as “an internalisation of schemes with which they are capable of interpreting reality in such a way as to afford perceptions and experiences of a redemptive hegemonic order” (ibid, p.141). The schemes of ritualisation and their processes of internalisation and reinterpreting of reality will be explained and analysed in this chapter, focusing on the transformation of novices into initiated adherents. The discussion to follow is framed in terms of the Van Gennep’s exploration of rites of passage with regard to three stages – those of separation, liminality and incorporation. The rite of passage in question here is the rite of formal initiation into ISKCON. This chapter deals mainly with the lead-up to this rite (the first two stages in Van Gennep’s framework). The third stage of incorporation is discussed in chapter five.

4.1. Van Gennep and the Rites of Passage

A. Van Gennep uses the term “rite of passage” to describe universal (but culture-specific) practices of ceremonialising life’s major events (Beck and Metrick, 1990). He defines these as: “Rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age” (as cited in Turner, 1969, p.94). In *The Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep (1960) discusses rites related to pregnancy and childbirth, initiation rites, betrothal and marriage, funerals, and other types of rites of passage. While initiation rites in ISKCON are rites of passages, the daily ritual practice performed in ISKCON is of a different category and plays a crucial role in directing the entry process.

Van Gennep (1960, pp.156-166) argues that every rite of passage is a three-stage process facilitating the movement of an individual or group from one stage of life or social status to the next. Van Gennep's three stages, as noted in the introduction, are those of separation, liminality, and incorporation. "Separation" refers to the detachment of an individual or group from a given set of socio-cultural conditions or from a given status in the social structure (Turner, 1969, p.94). In this phase, a barrier is set up between the individual and his/her former community and/or social identity. Separated from a previous world, and not yet incorporated into a new one, the individual enters a state of marginality or liminality (from *limen*, signifying "threshold" in Latin); now the state of the novice is ambiguous. S/he has lost the attributes or habits of the past, and has not yet obtained the attributes of the future state/ identity/ community. Transformation from the old to the new is facilitated when the novice undergoes incorporation rites symbolising a state of aggregation (Van Gennep, 1960, pp.19-20).

In keeping with Van Gennep's tri-partite scheme of separation, transition (liminality) and incorporation, entry into ISKCON too involves separation from one's previous environment and circles, followed by a period of discovery and emergence into the ISKCON world; a transformation completed with the novice undergoing formal initiation rites. Daily ritual practice is an indispensable element in the novice's progression from one stage to the next. The daily rites guide the novice on a journey which gradually makes him/her eligible for initiation. Entry into ISKCON is in a deeper and more formalised sense associated with the process of becoming an initiated member. The three stages are discussed below.

4.1.1. Separation

Before a new recruit is officially confirmed and socially recognised by others as an integrated member of the community, the person must first abandon his/her previous identity and lifestyle. S/he draws further away from his/her past life as s/he embraces ISKCON's daily ritual practices and observes its taboos, its social structure and institutional hierarchy. This involves a process of differentiation that highlights how far ISKCON's activities and social world are different from, and mostly incompatible with, the activities in entrants' former social milieu. ISKCON offers an understanding of the world very different from that considered normal in mainstream Western society. Engagement in ritual practice in the ISKCON social milieu is contrasting the socially accepted practices prevalent in the Western world.

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 meat consumption, illicit sex, the use of intoxicants, and gambling.

Newcomers drawn to ISKCON's way of life seek to adhere to these regulations. Chanting on a daily basis and observing the dietary and other prohibitions has the effect of gradually distancing the person from his/her former social environment and promoting social integration within ISKCON. For many Western entrants into ISKCON their first few months of practising the chanting and respecting the taboos is characterized by a withdrawal from former social groups and networks. This is reinforced by the taboos on consuming alcohol and non-vegetarian food. Even

as the individual resists any pressure from former associates to engage in these activities s/he becomes more comfortable in the company of ISKCON adherents. This setting apart of the individual through rule-governed strategies of ritualisation is a crucial aspect typical of the early stages of entry into ISKCON.

The close relationship between ISKCON's daily rituals and its social system confirms Bell's (1992, p.194) point that social order is maintained not by law but by ritual. Only those who are committed to following the prescribed rituals can enter into, and function within, ISKCON's hierarchical social structure. Bhaktivinoda, Bhaktisiddhanta, and Bhaktivedanta understood the need to create a structure conducive to the promotion and effectiveness of daily ritual practice. Such a structure was necessary to separate the ritual practitioner from a secular (worldly) environment and to transfer the newcomer into a shared sacred arena.

4.1.2. Transition

The transition period is characterized by the individual's commitment to become an initiated adherent. This commitment combined with the following of the daily ritual practice and the respecting of taboos is what makes the individual a "novice" entering the transitional stage. The novice is a marginal entity because s/he has not yet attained the status of an initiated member and has not yet fully left behind his or her former social circles. The novice is a person who follows the institutionalised procedures for attaining eligibility for initiation. Eligibility for initiation is attained through schemes of ritualisation directed by historically defined proselytising strategies, guided by a traditional social structure and a set of complex institutional rules. Within that interactive field of power and control, the guru plays an indispensable and active role in guiding the aspirant disciple in attaining the required level of ritual mastery,

adhering to the schemes of ritual practice, and complying with institutional requirements.

The period of transition or liminality is essentially a period of waiting. It is a period when the individual steadfastly adheres to ISKCON's regulations, deepens his/her sense of commitment, completes a disciple course, sits for an examination, and receives a written recommendation. The novice is allowed to cultivate a relationship with an ISKCON guru only after a period of practicing the daily rituals, a time during which s/he becomes acquainted with the essence of the teachings by the study of ISKCON's books. During that phase the beginner learns to chant the *pranama* mantra of Prabhupada.¹³⁷ A *pranama* mantra is an expression of deferential respect towards the guru. In due course, the neophyte starts cultivating a relationship with an ISKCON guru, and eventually s/he asks to be accepted as this guru's disciple. Once the guru accepts, the aspirant-disciple is allowed to chant the guru's *pranama* mantra.¹³⁸ The aspiring disciple then recites the guru's mantra each time when s/he meets the guru, and at the beginning of any devotional ritual activity. The process of how the novice accepts the spiritual mentorship of an ISKCON guru is, however, firmly regulated by institutional rules.

The institutional stipulations for gaining eligibility for initiation require that one must have engaged in "devotional service", strictly followed the four regulatory principles outlined earlier, and chanted sixteen rounds of 108 Hare Krishna mantras

¹³⁷ The Sanskrit *pranama* mantra of Prabhupada is: *nama om vishnu-padaya krishna-presthaya bhutale srimate bhaktivedanta-svamin iti namine namaste sarasvate deve gaura-vani-pracarine nirvisesa-sunyavadi-pascatya-desatarine*. The translation used within ISKCON literature is: "I offer my respectful obeisances unto His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who is very dear to Lord Krishna, having taken shelter at His lotus feet. Our respectful obeisances are unto you, O spiritual master, servant of Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Goswami. You are kindly preaching the message of Lord Chaitanyadeva and delivering the Western countries, which are filled with impersonalism and voidism" (Bhaktivedanta, 2012d).

¹³⁸ The *pranama* mantra of an ISKCON guru is often restricted to the first line of Bhaktivedanta's *pranama* mantra where the name of Prabhupada is then replaced with the name of the ISKCON guru.

each day for at least one year without interruption.¹³⁹ While the ritual expertise gained by practising the chanting and respecting the taboos for a certain period is a prerequisite for approaching an ISKCON guru for guidance, ISKCON's institutional rules prescribe a number of extra conditions.

GBC guidelines prescribe that during the first six months, a person aspiring for initiation should not commit to serve a particular ISKCON guru, but should rather accept and worship Prabhupada as the Founder of ISKCON as his or her first *siksha-guru* (instructing guru).¹⁴⁰ During the Annual General Meeting of the ISKCON Governing Body Commission in Mayapur, ISKCON's headquarters in India, a resolution (2012/305) was passed recommending all prospective disciples and aspiring initiates to attend an "ISKCON Disciple Course" prior to their initiation, and preferably before choosing an initiating spiritual master. The major aims of this course are to help the students understand: the importance of *diksha-guru* and *siksha-guru* in ISKCON; the unique position of Bhaktivedanta; the role of ISKCON gurus, especially in regard to their adherence to the teachings of Bhaktivedanta and to the authority structure within ISKCON. In addition it is intended to help the prospective disciple in the selection of an ISKCON guru by learning how the authentic guru's qualifications are described in the Chaitanya Vaishnava scriptures, and to prepare the disciples to strictly follow the initiation vows. It also aims at helping aspiring initiates to understand the principles of guru worship and the relationship between service to an ISKCON guru and the mission of ISKCON.

¹³⁹ Bendix (1978, p.17) argues that legitimation is one of the powerful things that ritual does. He writes: "legitimation achieves what power alone cannot". Correct ritual practice is in ISKCON a major factor legitimating the novice's eligibility to undergo the initiation ritual.

¹⁴⁰ When King (2007, p.142) while visiting the ISKCON Govinda restaurant at Soho Street in London, asked a novice who recently joined ISKCON if he was initiated he replied: "No, we are advised for the first six months to concentrate on the Founder-*acharya* and then only to think of approaching a guru".

The “Disciple Course” offers prospective initiates knowledge, skills, and the means to develop faith and confidence. It enables them to acquire the attributes expected of them by the institution to make them efficient instruments in meeting the proselytising goals of the society. Only after successful completion of the first six-month preparatory period, and after having passed an examination, must the candidate choose his future ISKCON *diksha-guru* (initiating guru). My research data shows that on average interviewees waited more than 2.8 years between first practicing chanting and following the rules and the actual date of their first initiation. This period significantly exceeds the minimum waiting period for initiation of one year (including the six month preparatory period and the six months waiting time after having taken shelter of an ISKCON guru). This demonstrates that the process by which individuals become converts is generally a slow one. King (2007, p.154), discussing *harinama* initiation, affirms this: “Literature on the movement generally puts the period of novitiate at between six months to a year, but today it usually lasts considerably longer.”

The questions of the exam that candidates need to pass at the end of the six-month preparatory period are indicators of ISKCON’s recruiting policy. They are meant to test the candidate’s basic understanding of Bhaktivedanta’s teachings, his or her commitment, faith, adherence to the following of the four regulative principles, understanding of the meaning of chanting, acceptance of Prabhupada as the preeminent *siksha-guru*, philosophical knowledge, dedication to stay in ISKCON, and commitment to accept the ISKCON Governing Body Commission as authority.¹⁴¹ The

¹⁴¹ The exam questions, as published in ISKCON Law 7.2.1.1.6 are as follows: 1. What are the qualifications of a bona fide spiritual master? 2. Why are you convinced to follow the orders of the spiritual master in this life, and even life after life? 3. Why does one worship the spiritual master like God? 4. Do you believe the spiritual master speaks the Absolute Truth? If so, why? 5. Under what circumstances should the spiritual master be rejected? 6. What are the qualifications and responsibilities of a disciple? 7. What is the unique position of Prabhupada in ISKCON? 8. Why do you accept Lord Krsna as the Supreme Personality of Godhead? 9. Why do we follow the four regulative principles? 10.

exam questions reflect the institutional expectations and the desired profile of the novice eligible for receiving initiation. Bell (1992, p.107) notes that the purpose of ritualisation is to ritualise persons, who in turn deploy schemes of ritualisation in order to dominate (shift or nuance) other, non-ritualised situations to render them more coherent with the values of the ritualising schemes and capable of molding perceptions. ISKCON's examination system and the more recently introduced "Disciple Course" enable a strategic moulding of the worldviews and lifestyles of its adherents.

ISKCON's institutional rules for initiation are part of "a process of transforming newcomers into bona fide members of the group" (Long and Hadden, 1983, pp.5-6). However, that transformation process is not only dictated by the institutional ISKCON canon laws, but also by local ISKCON leadership represented by national or local ISKCON councils and temple boards. The National Council of ISKCON UK, for instance, has introduced additional conditions for receiving initiation. It has added the condition that, in order to receive a recommendation for initiation, the individual must actively support ISKCON's mission. The local leadership, consisting of mainly senior adherents, will engage the candidate disciple, and evaluate his or her performance. In reality it is either the local or national council who decides to recommend an individual. This means that the local or regional leadership will communicate their expectations to the candidate, who then will act to fulfil the extra conditions. The recruiting, certifying and placement (Long and Hadden, 2003, p.6) of the individual is mostly done locally.

Why do we chant Hare Krsna? 11. What is the position of the GBC Body? 12. Explain the difference between the body and the self. 13. What is ISKCON, and why should one remain in ISKCON? (ISKCON GBC, 2007, p.62).

In brief, ISKCON's institutional laws and regulations emphasise the combined practice of the chanting of Krishna's names and the following of prohibitions, but add a number of extra conditions for approaching an ISKCON guru. The examinations for novices, besides testing the person's basic understanding of Bhaktivedanta's teaching and his or her adherence to the practice of daily rituals, are concerned with testing the individual's commitment and dedication to accept and serve under ISKCON's hierarchical authority system. Adherence to ISKCON authority is emphasised and eventually explained to candidate initiates during a multiple-session "ISKCON Disciple Course". Control on ritual practice and the issuing of additional guidelines for receiving initiation from an ISKCON guru is the prerogative of the national or local ISKCON leadership. Once the novice has gone successfully through the institutional procedures the novice receives initiation, a ceremonial confirmation symbolising incorporation into ISKCON.

4.1.3. *Incorporation*

In ISKCON this ceremonial confirmation takes place at first initiation, or *harinama-diksha*. It comprises a naming ceremony, a *homa* fire sacrifice, the receiving of a mantra, and a lifelong commitment to the performance of daily rituals. The disciple receives the *maha*-mantra,¹⁴² which Broo (2003, p.162) argues, is technically not a mantra but *harinama*, Krishna's names. Later on, when the *guru* has observed that the disciple has become a little more advanced, she or he is offered second initiation, or *diksha*, and receives a sacred thread *yajnopavita* (only for males) and the *gayatri*, a secret mantra for private meditation three times a day. Sometimes, when the guru considers the disciple exceptionally advanced, he may offer, with the permission of

¹⁴² From M. Broo's (2003, pp.151-157) analysis of the description of initiation in Gaudiya Vaishnava scriptures, emerge a quite elaborate historical variety of initiation ceremonies. Hence, all ceremonies focus around the transmittance of a mantra.

the aspirant initiate's local ISKCON authorities, first and second (*harinama* and Brahmin) initiation simultaneously.

At the time of *harinama* initiation the candidate-initiate, freshly bathed, dressed in new clothes, and his body marked with the *tilaka* marks of Vishnu, approaches the guru and prostrates him/herself at the guru's feet.¹⁴³ The bathing, tonsuring and new clothes are considered to enhance the aspirant initiate's purity in consciousness. These acts symbolise the virtue of cleanliness, a Brahmin quality believed to be conducive for attaining *brahma-bhuta*, spiritual consciousness. Then the guru gives a lecture explaining how to avoid undesirable inner mental attitudes during the practice of chanting Krishna's names. After the sermon the guru asks the aspirant disciple to recite the initiation vows,¹⁴⁴ whereby the initiate makes a formal commitment to chant a minimum of sixteen rounds of the Hare Krishna mantra daily on a string of 108 *japa*, or prayer beads. In addition the aspirant initiate promises to abstain from eating meat and engaging in illicit sex (no sex other than for the procreation of children), to refrain from gambling, and to avoid the use of intoxicants such as cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, tea, and coffee (Rochford, 2007, p.11).¹⁴⁵ After the vows are made, the guru hands over a new set of chanting beads, on which he already has counted one round of the Hare Krishna mantra, and gives the person one of the many names of Krishna, followed with the suffix "dasa" for male, and "dasi" for female initiates. This indicates that the initiates now dedicate their lives to the service of the guru, and that they are part of Krishna's or ISKCON's family; it also confirms

¹⁴³ *Tilaka* marks are sacred clay marks placed on the forehead and other parts of the body to designate one as a follower of Visnu, Rama, Siva, etc. (Bhaktivedanta, 2012a).

¹⁴⁴ Initiation is also a communion ritual as it represents a contact with the "spiritual" line of predecessor spiritual preceptors going back to Chaitanya and Krishna. According to Van Genep (1960, p.29), initiation is also a form of communion, a rite usually including the pronouncing of an oath.

¹⁴⁵ Van Genep (1960, p.59) observed that rituals, such as initiation ceremonies, often include a rite of passage. In ISKCON, the vows to give up mundane pleasures, included in the ceremony of first initiation, represents a breaking up with former life and habits.

that they are part of the family or group of disciples following a particular guru.

Disciples of the same guru regard each other as either godbrothers or godsisters.

The disciple is also offered new neck-beads made of the wood of the *tulasi* (basil) plant, held sacred by Vaishnavas. The tradition claims that the *guru* burns all previous sinful karma of the initiate. After the making of vows, the receiving of the chanting beads, neck-beads and a new name, the occasion is concluded by a *homa*, a fire sacrifice dedicated to Vishnu. During the sacrifice, conducted either by the guru or an appointed Brahmin priest, the initiates throw grains in the sacrificial fire and at the end make a banana offering, an act symbolising the burning of their past karma. After the ceremony the disciple offers *dakshina*, a donation to the guru.

4.2. Schemes of Ritualisation

While Van Gennep's schemes and the stages of socialisation that I have identified above offer a general understanding of the process of entry, they do not adequately explain the influence of ritual practice on this process in the case of ritual-centred organisations like ISKCON. In this section I will demonstrate, by returning to the narratives of my interviewees, how the chanting and *prasadam* rituals act as a mechanism that simultaneously promotes social solidarity within ISKCON and socio-cultural alienation in relation to the rest of society. Moreover, I will discuss the basic conditions necessary for alienation from larger society and integration within ISKCON to take place, highlighting the agency of adherents in triggering alienation, and analysing the power that the ritual practitioner derives from the social dimension.

4.2.1. Separation

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.

Following the restrictions and taboos imposed by ISKCON, in a number of cases, caused strong reactions from family members. In 1988, when another entrant Victor (Croatian, aged 46, and an ISKCON devotee for over twenty-five years),¹⁴⁶ started to have daily contact with ISKCON adherents and regularly attended events organised by ISKCON, he experienced resistance from his parents. Victor conveys this as follows:

My parents could not cope with the fact of my becoming a Hindu priest, vegetarian and “not normal”. They insisted that I would get married, employed and normal like other people. As I felt uneasy about it, I decided to get out of these circumstances, and thus, I joined an ISKCON temple. If they hadn't teased me in that way, I might not have joined. Two to three years later my parents changed their attitude. Since then, I have a very nice and loving relationship with them.

¹⁴⁶ Interviewed on October 30, 2011.

It is not without significance that Victor sees the conflict with his parents as a major factor that made him join an ISKCON temple. His adherence to the ritual practice and taboos, and his feelings of discomfort with his parents' objection to his new adopted lifestyle, resulted in separation from his family. His practice of daily rites and taboos thus influenced his social relationships, causing separation from his former community and concurrently encouraging his integration into ISKCON. This phenomenon has been recognised before. Van Gennep (1960, pp.93-94) observed that in the 'middle ages' certain sub-rites of Christian baptism rituals, which were only reserved for adults, involved separation and incorporation at the same time. These sub-rites symbolized a rebirth, an incorporation into the community of the faithful, and a subsequent separation from the unfaithful.

The separation from family and friends also depends on the agency of the individual. For Caroline and Victor the separation from, and tensions with, parents and former circles seemed not to be of their own seeking but rather an effect of their ritual actions. Another entrant, Rafael (French, aged 59, and an ISKCON devotee for over thirty years),¹⁴⁷ presents a different scenario. He deliberately chose to become disconnected from his parents for more than six years. In his words:

The process of Krishna Consciousness is a purifying process. I did not want to meet with my family for six or seven years. I needed to be isolated or otherwise I would become contaminated by them. It was not the time to meet with my family members. I had found new values in life and I wanted to protect them by all means. If you have a young plant in the garden you want to protect it. It was not the time to mingle with the people I was associating [with] before.

This fear of becoming "contaminated" by the members of one's own family is an important factor motivating newcomers to limit social interaction with their family

¹⁴⁷ Interviewed on January 28, 2012.

and former circles. The desire to live separate from former circles/family directly relates to the ritual practice. It is based on the principle that, by their habits of eating meat, drinking alcohol, etc., family members would encourage them to break ISKCON's taboos. This is firmly associated with ISKCON's intent to create Brahmins, a most exalted status traditionally representing a state of purity required for the performance of rituals (see Lipner, 1994b, p.89 and 116). The taboos required for maintaining brahminical purity, are expected to be strictly followed socially and morally by all ISKCON adherents, including new recruits and novices. Moreover, it is, as explained in previous chapters, believed to be a requirement for ritual efficacy and for experiencing its metaphysical effects. Rafael's example shows the importance placed on purity. Ritualisation works by producing sets of oppositions, and the polarity between purity and pollution established by the taboos is a crucial factor.

Van Gennep (1960, p.190) maintains that rites of separation are often concerned with dietary and sexual taboos. By practising ISKCON's prescribed four regulative principles the individual sets up a wall of separation between the worlds of ISKCON adherents and that of the novice's former circles. Commitment to rituals, Rambo (1993, pp.124-141) claims, often involves a painful confrontation, a decision to enter a new life and a painful vacillation between two worlds. While the sharing of food represents a type of incorporation, the refusal of foods such as flesh, meat, eggs, onions, garlic, or the drinking of alcohol previously shared with members of former communities are elements causing separation. This indicates how the ritual practitioner is socially controlled by norms of behaviour associated with the ritual practice. What make formalisation and ritual effective is an intangible form of power, a means of social control (Bloch 1975a, p.12, 16 and 22ff). The distancing from former circles is often unplanned. In some cases, it involves a deliberate decision on the individual's part.

It is worth noting, however, that the shift may not always be so drastic. For Western entrants the *prasadam* or consecrated lacto-vegetarian food shared within ISKCON holds considerable novelty whereas this is not the case for individuals of Indian and Hindu origin. One interviewee, Kumar, aged fifty, British but from a Hindu background, notes that the *prasadam* did not feel particularly novel or different, as he was used to eating *chapatis*, rice, *dal*, etc., at home everyday. His parents had no objection to his regular visits to the ISKCON temple at the Bhaktivedanta Manor in Watford. Therefore, for Kumar, his adoption of the lacto-vegetarian diet and his attendance at the temple services have not been the cause of tension with his family members. Kumar's experience shows that ritual practice causes separation from previous circles only when there are significant social-cultural differences between the old and the new.

4.2.2. Bonding with the New Social Group

The cases of Caroline, Victor and Rafael demonstrate that the initial stages of entry into ISKCON involve a process of differentiation causing separation. The schemes of ritualisation of ISKCON adherents, the daily rituals and taboos, comprise a world very different from that of everyday mainstream Western society. The forced detachment caused by this difference does not only set up a barrier between the new ISKCON entrant and his former community/identity, but simultaneously also increases the individual's identification with the ISKCON community.¹⁴⁸ The shared engagement in the practice of ritual schemes, during the initial stage of separation from former

¹⁴⁸ Van Gennep (1960, pp.121-122), looking at a variety of rites of passage, observed that often during the entire novitiate all economic and legal ties are modified and sometimes broken all together. He maintains that although taboos erect a barrier between the novices and society, "the society is defenceless against the novices' undertakings". The setting up of a "barrier" is in line with Bell's (1992, p.107) conclusion that one of the purposes of ritualisation is to dominate other non-ritualised situations.

circles and communities, is simultaneously the basis for experiencing increased social solidarity vis-à-vis the ISKCON community. This validates Bell's (1992, p.115) assertion that "ritualisation appropriates coherence in terms of the interests of persons or groups." Thus, whereas Van Gennep's model would lead us to expect the stage of separation and the stages of transformation (liminality) and incorporation to be distinctive, what my interviewees' narratives indicate is that separation (from former social circles) in fact goes hand-in-hand with increased social bonding (with the new group), as well as a gradual process of personal transformation. The formal rite of passage in the form of *harinama diksha* merely formalizes this shift.

Bell (1992, p.181) notes that social empowerment constitutes the essence of ritual mastery. Social-interaction in the form of ritual performances practised in association with other ISKCON adherents results in the generation of collective beliefs in the power of the ritual, often enhanced by the sharing of stories about the positive results believed to occur from correct ritual practice. I will use the story of one particular individual, Bartek (Polish, aged 46, and an ISKCON devotee for over fifteen years), to show how the *eating* experience intensifies belief and promotes social solidarity. Additionally, the story demonstrates that for newcomers, social interaction with ISKCON adherents plays a crucial role in acquainting them with the daily rites in the first stage of entry. Based on interview data collected between 1980 and 1984 on ISKCON in North America, Shinn (1989, pp.119-121) observed that ISKCON entrants learn the meaning of the practice and beliefs through daily interaction with temple residents.

Many interviewees noted how, when they first consumed *prasadam*, they appreciated the fine taste of the Indian-like cuisine. This was the case

with Bartek, who first encountered *prasadam* during a Sunday feast programme in Poland. According to him:

My initial contact was through *prasadam*, which I ate at an open programme at the University of Opole. After that experience, I went one Sunday to attend the Sunday feast programme. The atmosphere was nice and the *prasadam* was delicious. The devotees seemed to be spiritually loaded. From this day I started visiting the temple regularly every week. My doubts were being removed by taking part in the activities in the temple such as cleaning, helping with the cooking and singing.¹⁴⁹

Bartek's reference to "removal of doubts" is linked to the learning of the deeper meaning of the rituals. By socialising with ISKCON adherents the novice becomes gradually acquainted with the concept of "spiritual food" or *prasadam*, and learns how to prepare lacto-vegetarian food and offer it to the deity. The newcomer is informed that *prasadam* is "karma-free food". In that way, s/he becomes 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 simultaneously a communicative and experiential process. In this regard, Valeri (1985, p.345) claims that ritual does not simply communicate but also promotes awareness of concepts that, to be believed, must be discovered through experience. It 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. This is in keeping with Bell (1992, p.111), who claims that ritual practice often is a matter of "programmed learning that involves perception and reproduction of concepts or principles."

The training of the novices includes learning how to offer food to Krishna. They are taught how to cook and offer the prepared food to a picture of Krishna at

¹⁴⁹ Interviewed on October 9, 2011.

home.¹⁵⁰ The meaning of offering the prepared food to Krishna is not only to obtain food free from “karmic” reactions, but also to communicate to all those involved that the activity of cooking, cleaning, the offering of the food, and afterwards the consuming of the “sacred” food along with everything else in this world, is Krishna’s energy, and is meant only for rendering service to Krishna. Intriguingly, many ISKCON adherents and visitors claim that *prasadam* has a particular subtle “spiritual” taste.

The activities related to *prasadam* during the weekly Sunday feast programme have a repetitive and a social dimension. Every week nearly the same people come together to participate in the activity of cooking, offering and meditative eating. Some of them have hardly any interest in the beliefs. Yet they come every week only because of the experience of *prasadam*. Ritual clearly serves as a mechanism for social solidarity. This solidarity is a factor associated with the *prasadam* experience, an element favourable to the integration of the individual into ISKCON society.

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.¹⁵¹ 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

¹⁵⁰ The offering procedure involves the ringing of a bell and the reciting of mantras before the pictures of Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (and/or the guru, in case the entrants are already aspiring for initiation from an ISKCON guru) and Krishna.

¹⁵¹ Interviewed on June 10, 2012.

straightforward mechanism for social solidarity” (Kertzer, 1988, p.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, pp.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.¹⁵² In ISKCON communities, this dialectic is fortified by the tradition’s epistemological approach wherein both the ritual experience and scriptural learning are means of receiving “true knowledge”.

4.2.3. *Transition*

Bell (1992, p.181) argues that ritualisation constitutes a particular dynamic of social empowerment resulting from the projection and embodiment of schemes facilitating the reproduction of reality and transforming individual’s social identity. In this section I examine the transformational processes using mainly the framework of the theory of Bourdieu, specifically aiming to develop an understanding of how ritual activity in ISKCON enables internalisation of beliefs, and reproduces an environment in which the tradition’s views are experienced as reality.

Van Gennep (1960, p.186), with regard to rites of passage, maintains that the novice is situated between two worlds. Because it is desired that the individual becomes incorporated into the new world, the person is isolated and maintained in an

¹⁵² 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, p.191).

intermediate position. To more deeply understand the marginal or intermediate position of entrants in ISKCON requires recognition of what socially distinguishes a novice from an initiated adherent. ISKCON novices may occasionally deviate from the regulated ritual practice and fail to chant the minimum of sixteen rounds of *japa*, or break some of the taboos and restrictions. Such failure, while not counted as a misdemeanour, is a serious deviation from the standards of ritual practice for initiated adherents. Novices are expected to reach a level of strict adherence to the codes of behaviour.¹⁵³ Until they do, they remain in an intermediate position of relative marginality. The gradual progression towards strict adherence to these codes is a primary feature of the stage of transition, leading the individual from intermediacy to full recognition as a confirmed insider. The following paragraphs discuss a stage in Caroline's journey of entry when she undergoes a number of changes that are typical for the transformational stage.

When Caroline joined the temple in Zurich in early 2001, she began participating in the daily schemes of the strictly ritualised morning and evening temple worship. She explains that during that time she wholeheartedly dedicated herself to the study of Vaishnava scriptures and to the (ritual) practice of Krishna consciousness. Caroline decided to try out the Hare Krishna way of life as a kind of experiment, a test that would last for about five years. In the course of her interview, she used the word 'experiment' repeatedly. The inspiration she got from her first travel to India, the consecutive socialisation with ISKCON adherents at the Zurich temple, and her first reading of *Bhagavad Gita* led her to study the culture, try out the life-style, and conduct three experiments. The first was returning to Vrindavana to study the Vaishnava scriptures under senior guidance, the second was following an introductory

¹⁵³ Van Genep (1960, p.112) explains that in traditional Brahmanism when a child becomes a novice (*brahmachari*), s/he is subjected to all sorts of taboos.

course at the ISKCON temple in Zurich, and the third was joining the temple community and engaging in devotional activities for a number of years, after which she decided to accept a spiritual master and receive initiation.

Her commitment to join the temple community marked the beginning of her period of “transition”. The transitional period brings the individual to a position of steadiness in the performance of daily ritual practice, gradually leading to the achievement of higher levels of ritual mastery and eventually, eligibility to undergo the initiation ritual. In the transition period the person is accepted as a novice, and is situated in a marginal position between his/her previous world and incorporation into ISKCON. This period is often characterized by intensified social interaction with ISKCON adherents; taking part in training and educational courses in ISKCON centres; deciding to live in the temple or to participate in ISKCON’s missionary activities; accepting an ISKCON guru; and following the institutional procedure to attain eligibility for initiation. All of this, combined with the daily ritual practice, produces a number of transformational effects. They constitute a number of preliminary sub-rites leading the person to the initiation rite. They are often seen as stages of purification by which further integration is effected, and estrangement from previous surroundings is enforced.

Generally, those who enter the transition period graduate from their novitiate by initiation. It is, however, significant that two out of forty interviewees remained in the transitional or marginal state and never committed themselves to the stipulated conditions for receiving initiation. Suzanne (French, aged 63, and an ISKCON devotee for over ten years),¹⁵⁴ for instance, one of the two interviewees who chose not to be initiated, came in contact with ISKCON in Paris during the year 2000 while

¹⁵⁴ Interviewed on May 15, 2012.

conducting a social anthropological study. Since then she has been associating with ISKCON adherents. While she felt that her experience with ISKCON brought God back into her life and while accepting ISKCON's philosophy and practice as universally applicable, she never accepted it as the highest knowledge and achievement available for humanity. She maintains that one philosophy alone cannot have a monopoly on truth. As a result, though Suzanne felt attracted and, to a certain extent, committed to the devotional practice, she did not commit herself to receiving initiation. Suzanne's refusal to accept ISKCON's truths as the only and ultimate truth confirms Rambo's (1993, p.45) argument that to be an active agent one must have ultimate control or the power to say "no". This indicates why she did not complete the incorporation process and refused to accept initiation from an ISKCON guru.

This suggests that transformation and incorporation requires not just the building of bonds with the group through social interaction, but also the internalisation of the group's beliefs and values through ritual action. This results in a personal deep-rooted acceptance and application of the tradition's worldviews. Bell (1992, pp.108-109) claims that "ritualisation validates and extends the schemes they are internalising." She uses the term "ritual mastery" to designate the practical mastery of such schemes of ritualisation, a way of transforming individuals into ritualised persons who in turn deploy schemes of ritualisation.

In ISKCON ritual is an activity that encourages internalisation of beliefs, and the redefinition of cultural dispositions in keeping with the tradition's worldviews. In other words, the worlds as lived and the worlds as presented by ISKCON's teachings merge and fuse through the power of ritual practice. This transformation is initiated by the individual through his/her decision to practice the daily rites and simultaneously adhere to the restrictions and taboos. When Victor, in 1988 in Croatia, started to

practice the chanting and respect the restrictions, his cultural beliefs and aspirations underwent far-reaching transformations. In his words:

I rejected meat-eating and intoxication; the belief that I am the body and that there is only one life; and the idea that materialism offers happiness. In addition, I gave up the endeavour for making a career and the idea that family life is a source of happiness. Instead I attempted to attain liberation from repeated birth and death and to develop a godly character. Generally, I lost interest in worldly topics.¹⁵⁵

Victor's transformation entailed the acceptance of the concepts of karma, reincarnation and the Vaishnava codes of morality, represented by the restrictions and taboos. The strict moral codes of Vaishnava behaviour transformed his outlook and disposition. The combination of, on the one hand, the rites of *prasadam* and chanting, and on the other hand, the belief in karma, demonstrates how socialisation helps to internalise the concept of karma and amalgamate the world of experience with the religious perception of reality. Through ritualised action, the inner becomes outer, and the subjective understanding of the world becomes a reality. Besides incorporating the individual into a group or society, ritual thus also helps to structure a sense of reality and an understanding of the world around us. Additionally ritual gives structure to everyday life and provides confidence to cope with the future (Kertzer, 1988, pp.9-12).

The daily rites of chanting, *prasadam*, hearing scriptural recitations, etc. are believed to be key practices that have the power to destroy the individual's previous karma and attain a level of consciousness characterized by a constant meditation on (or awareness of) and devotional servitude to Krishna, an awareness allowing the person to avoid making new karma-producing reactions and causing rebirth. The acceptance of these beliefs is intertwined with a particular structure of reality. The following testimonies demonstrate individuals' acceptance of a newly constructed reality and

¹⁵⁵ Interviewed on October 30, 2011.

show how ritual acts turn their subjective worlds into reality and enhance their confidence to face the future.

Bartek from Poland (whom we encountered previously), and Adam (English, aged 59, and an ISKCON devotee for over thirty years), from England, both accepted their newly discovered reality as a fact. The perception of being a metaphysical self, which they refer to as self-realisation, has for them become an actuality and a “science”. The quotes below show how much their religious faith depends on the belief in a metaphysical existence and its transmigration through embodied forms due to the effects of karma:

The fact of the existence of the soul, its transmigration and the law of karma stands for me on itself as I treat them as scientific facts belonging to the science of yoga or the science of the soul. Religious faith belongs to the category of the material conditioning and limitations of the human beings so I consider religious faith the preliminary stage of this science. When one gets some knowledge of the soul one’s faith transforms into realisation and matures into solid spiritual experience.¹⁵⁶

I was convinced that in my life the only thing to do was striving for self-realisation. All other things are a complete waste of time. I lost my enthusiasm for everything else, no endeavouring anymore for material gain.¹⁵⁷

The perspective of being an eternal metaphysical being brings about confidence to cope with the future. Victor,¹⁵⁸ for instance, asserted that his practice and beliefs helped him to face the uncertainty of his future and develop inner feelings of detachment that helped him cope with fears arising from an over-competitive spirit of modern society. For, Laura (Czech, aged 34, and an ISKCON devotee for over fifteen years),¹⁵⁹ confidence in the future meant receiving answers to her questions and

¹⁵⁶ Bartek; interviewed on October 9, 2011.

¹⁵⁷ Adam; interviewed on October 30, 2011.

¹⁵⁸ Interviewed on October 30, 2011.

¹⁵⁹ Interviewed on January 22, 2012.

understanding that there is a purpose in life. Previously, she had been of the view that: “If life is full of suffering then it is better not to live”. Now she perceives the future as very bright because by chanting she can go back to Krishna, and regain eternal life.

Bartek’s, Victor’s, and Laura’s transformed sense of reality can be understood through P. Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus”. Bourdieu defines “habitus” as an instance of practice imbedded within a set of structured dispositions engendered in people that reproduces the socio-cultural environment.¹⁶⁰ It in turn reinforces these very values, principles and ethos. Habitus is supported by a set of structured dispositions, consisting of worldview, ethos, traditional values and moral principles. This illustrates both Bourdieu’s thesis that “ritual mastery” cannot be isolated from its support and Bell’s (1992, p.107) conclusion that “ritual can exist only in the specific cultural schemes and strategies for ritualisation.” Habitus is therefore best understood as a dialectical relationship between a set of habitual structured dispositions and a structured environment representing the agent’s practical interpretation of the world. The habitus of ritual practice plays a central role in this dialectical relationship between the dispositions and the social milieu, leading the individual to reproduce the environment, and create a structured form of reality. As explained in the introduction (p.55), Bourdieu (1977, pp.87-95, 118-120, 124) maintains that the implicit dynamic of such a “structured form of reality” in the end leads to the production of a “ritualised body”.

The following are extracts from two interviews showing how ISKCON entrants have developed a different sense of reality based on a particular set of structured dispositions:

¹⁶⁰ Bell: 1992, p.78.

My perception of the world, my likes and dislikes, everything had changed. I lost taste for sense enjoyment. It became more bitter than sweet. I deleted my contact list and avoided the people with whom I was formerly acquainted with. Using all my attention to concentrate on my spiritual practice I forgot about my bad habits. At the same time I became more responsible in my study at the university and my relationship with my family members. Krishna taught me how to live in harmony with people and not to live a miserable life centred on giving satisfaction to the body and senses, but rather to live spiritually for the pleasure of Krishna. Krishna opened my eyes and started to transform a dog into a human being.¹⁶¹

The major change in my view was that I started to see things more in relationship with God, and less with myself. I felt that those attitudes which were being suppressed and ridiculed in western society were now of great value. This brought me great satisfaction and I was at home changing to practising attitudes like humility, non-jealousness, etc. The perception of myself was that I became more self-confident. I had less anxiety about ordinary things and I felt the presence of God in my life. I felt very dependent on God.¹⁶²

It is significant that these excerpts from interviews with Nykyta from Ukraine, and Kris from Switzerland, refer to a new set of structured dispositions in the form of expressions of worldviews focused on the presence of God; the exhibition of an ethos associated with the abandonment of former habits revolving around sense enjoyment, and the manifestation of traditional values such as selfless service, humility, non-jealousness, self-confidence, and moral responsibility.

The series of events emerging from Caroline's story, which are typical for her transitional period, further help to clarify how exactly these dispositions are generated. 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*. The events in the transition period not only had a profound effect on Caroline's cultural dispositions, but also changed her worldviews. Her changed conceptions of

¹⁶¹ Nykyta (nationality: Ukraine; age: 25); interviewed on June 21, 2012.

¹⁶² Kris (nationality: Germany; age: 28); interviewed on April 14, 2012.

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, p.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." Earlier, in the section on "separation", the dominance of ritualisation in a social context was addressed and the redemptive hegemonic order became apparent from ISKCON's theological and psychological worldviews.

The interview data in general show for each case an abundance of factors contributing towards imbedding these structured dispositions. Novices often engage in self-study by reading ISKCON's books or systematic study in the form of organised courses; they participate in the hearing of lectures presented by swamis or senior adherents, or attend question-and-answer sessions. They participate in *isthaghosti sangas*, regular meetings of ISKCON adherents in which they talk about subjects such as Vaishnava etiquette; discuss the behaviour and qualities of a devotee of Krishna and engage in hearing Vaishnava scriptures; plan missionary activities/strategies, and perform *kirtan*, the chanting of Krishna's names. All these activities help to cultivate a worldview and ethos, and to establish a cognitive framework within which to situate the cultural dispositions learnt through ritual.

4.3. The Role of the Ritual Specialist or Guru

The guru plays an important role in enabling the novice to embrace the new worldview and adopt the cultural dispositions central to ISKCON. The history in the second chapter showed how Bhaktisiddhanta paved the path for Bhaktivedanta to initiate Westerners and offer them Brahmin initiation. The Brahmins, ISKCON gurus and the *sannyasis* or renunciants, are considered to have attained a position of ritual purity. In other words they are the ritual specialists who control the system of progression to Brahminhood. Additionally, they produce and mould the social schemes with the help of institutionalised procedures. The proselytising strategies developed by Bhaktivinoda, Bhaktisiddhanta and Bhaktivedanta were such that ritual specialists exercised the authority to administrate, legislate, evaluate and set standards for ritual performance. The ritual specialists have the power and authority to promote individuals via their control of the ritualisation schemes and the establishment of institutional procedures. In this way a class of ritualised persons is produced for executing the proselytising goals of the society. The system controlled by the ritual specialists also preserves and protects their own position of authority.

The methods of internalisation of ISKCON worldviews and dispositions brings novices, often within a few months, to a state of steadiness in their daily ritual practice and instils within them the desire to meet the criteria for undergoing initiation. For ISKCON-novices initiation means to attain a permanent right to serve in ISKCON and for Brahman initiates it offers access to deity worship in ISKCON temples.

The guru plays a central role in guiding novices to achieve promotion within ISKCON's social hierarchy. According to J. Richardson and M. Stewart (1978b, pp.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, p.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, pp.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, p.134), who concludes that correct performance of the ritual is crucial to the promotion and maintenance of ritual mastery.

Bell (1992, p.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, p.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. In terms of Bourdieu's theory, the guru symbolises the perfection of a person who has acquired all the necessary structured dispositions, 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. From my twentythree-year experience as an insider participant-observer in ISKCON, I noticed that while novices actively choose their ISKCON guru according to individual preferences and expectations, their allegiance to that guru is generally not exclusive. *Leap* (2012), a Finish documentary on ISKCON, a work demonstrating the guru-disciple relationship in ISKCON, may leave us with the idea that novices take guidance from only one guru. In practice, however, the majority of ISKCON members take direction from multiple gurus and senior teachers, and do not hold an exclusive allegiance to their

initiating guru.¹⁶³ ISKCON adherents, however, do not seek guidance from non-ISKCON gurus, but rather build a social guru-network within the global ISKCON community. The reason for this is that Bhaktivedanta warned his disciples against associating with his godbrothers, for he feared that their instructions would differ from his (Goswami, 2012, p.173). In a letter to Rupanuga, Bhaktivedanta writes: “So it is better not to mix with my godbrothers very intimately because instead of inspiring our students and disciples they may sometimes pollute them” (Bhaktivedanta, 2012l). Hence, the bond with the guru and the guru’s charisma is a major factor promoting entry into ISKCON.¹⁶⁴

We see an example of an evolving disciple-guru relationship in the case of Victor.¹⁶⁵ 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

¹⁶³ Such gurus are called “instructing gurus” or *siksa gurus*. While having many *siksa gurus* is allowed, one can have only one *diksa guru*, or initiating spiritual master.

¹⁶⁴ At least the bond with the guru and the guru’s charisma is not in the same way as with groups like the Sathya Sai Baba movement or the Sahaja Yoga movement, where the recognition of the charismatic follower is a major factor in conversion (Coney, 1999, p.97).

¹⁶⁵ Interviewed on October 30, 2011.

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 *brahmacari* (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. This development is typical for the transitional stage.

4.4. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that ritual practice is central to entry into ISKCON. The chanting, *prasadam*, and temple rituals are central factors guiding the individuals from their early contact with ISKCON and throughout the whole period of their participation as a novitiate. A major feature of ISKCON's daily ritual practice is that it can be perceived as a form of social control. First, it exerts social control by causing tensions with the individual's former circles and by increasing the individual's sense

of social solidarity within the ISKCON milieu. This confirms Bell's view that ritualisation controls by producing sets of oppositions instigating integration or separation, social solidarity or disassociation. Tension with, and disassociation from, former circles is most intense when there is a high level of socio-cultural differentiation between the ISKCON world and the individuals' former environment. The social dimension empowers ritual practice by encouraging adherence to ISKCON's collective beliefs. The ritual experience enhances belief through the sharing of the positive results of the ritual practice amongst adherents and from individual experience of efficacy of the ritual in line with scriptural statements.

The transitional period is characterized by the effect of ritual practice on internalisation of beliefs, worldviews, and values. In ISKCON ritual activity involves redefinition of ethos, internalisation of beliefs, and the establishment of traditional worldviews by integrating the world as lived with the world idealised by the tradition. Through ritualised action, the subjective ISKCON world picture becomes reality. Ritual helps to structure a sense of reality and understanding of the world in terms of the notions of karma, rebirth, etc. This framework gives structure and confidence to cope with the future and live in the expectation of regaining eternal life. In addition, the daily practice of chanting, cooking, ritual temple worship, etc, combined with social interaction through activities such as study and engagement in missionary activities, gives rise to a structured environment supporting the ritual practice. The structured environment, in a dialectic relationship with the individual's dispositions, functioning within ISKCON's social (ritualised) body governed by its own social hierarchy, worldviews, and rules, empower the ritual practitioner to reproduce an environment in which the tradition's worldviews are experienced as a reality.

Novices, especially in the transformational phase, are exposed to the projection of schemes concerned with the internalisation of beliefs/ideologies, as well as to social/hierarchical schemes, strategies based on the opposition of purity and pollution and the creation of Brahmins. The sets of oppositions, especially the chanting combined with the taboos function, on the one hand, as an external strategy (horizontal) making the distinction between ritualised persons and non-ritualised persons on the basis of the principles of purity and pollution, which leads to a division or separation between them, and on the other hand, as an internal strategy (vertical) using the same set of oppositions to encourage novices towards gaining proficiency in ritual mastery, attain ritual purity, and qualify for upgrade on the hierarchical ladder. The system of hierarchisation within ISKCON has two aspects. First, it makes a division between what is pure and impure. Second, it is a system of integration based on attaining higher levels of purity. Ultimately, this leads one to become a Brahmin, a fully incorporated individual. This clarifies Bourdieu's (1977, p.163) description of hierarchisation as a strategy of "integration through division".

The advanced novice approaches an ISKCON guru to advance further. Besides compliance with institutional policies, the bond with an ISKCON guru is an indispensable element for the novice to receive initiation. The exploration of the social effects and the analysis of the internalisation process have shown that "ritualisation" is a pivotal factor within the process of entry in ISKCON. The power of social control attributed to "ritual action" has been most visible during early phases of entry characterized by the separation from one's previous milieu and integration into the ISKCON environment. The transitional period, which generally follows the period of separation, is focused on internalisation and the production of dispositions that empower the ritual practice to transform the individual's environment. This stage normally concludes when the candidate is formally initiated into ISKCON through the

rite of the *harinama diksha*. What follows is a period of further incorporation, where the initiate is drawn deeper and deeper into the practices, values and orientations of ISKCON. To gain deeper insights into this process, the next chapter will look at these processes of incorporation and also analyse his/her levels of awareness even as s/he continually projects the schemes of ritualisation onto everyday reality.

Chapter Five: Getting Incorporated into the ISKCON Community: seekership, commitment, and misrecognition

This chapter discusses the processes by which, following the liminal stage, ISKCON entrants gradually commit to its system of values, ritual and taboos. This is the third stage of “incorporation” following Van Gennep’s scheme. However, as noted in the previous chapter, the stages are not as distinctive as Van Gennep suggests. Processes of incorporation begin well before the rite of initiation as a full ISKCON member. Analysing the accounts of entrants, I examine their growing sense of meaning, purpose and belonging as they spend more time in ISKCON. I also identify the levels of their progressive commitment before they become initiated members. I argue here that incorporation into ISKCON involves enduring seekership and dedication to consecutive commitments. The forms of seekership analysed in this chapter are concerned with the development of an individual’s search for meaning *after* his or her contact with ISKCON. The presence of a variety of motivations, or the absence of clear motives, before coming in contact with ISKCON has already been referred to in the interview accounts presented in Chapter Three and Chapter Four, and will also be briefly discussed in Chapter Six. I also demonstrate how this gradual incorporation additionally entails misrecognition of, and blindness to, the power structures that lie behind ISKCON’s ritualisation schemes.

5.1. A Growing Sense of Meaning and Commitment

In the first section of this chapter I compare the results of Larry Shinn’s earlier research on ISKCON, conducted in the early eighties, with conclusions derived from the interview data from my own research. First, I consider Shinn’s argument that an individual’s incorporation into ISKCON involves seekership, a process that provides

satisfying answers for individual quests for meaning. Second, I analyse Shinn's observation that entry into ISKCON is a process of gradual transformation, and I examine his claim that sudden entries are followed by a long "conversion" process. Finally, I ascertain whether Shinn's conclusions remain valid today and what current research adds to his conclusions.

Larry Shinn (1989, pp.132-133), who researched ISKCON (from 1980 to 1984) and conducted more than a hundred in-depth interviews, concludes that a common denominator in most "devotee conversions" was a quest for meaning that was finally satisfied by their acceptance of the practice and teachings derived from the stories of Krishna. He found various motivational patterns entailing a search for meaning or shelter and seeking a guru (ibid, pp.128-129). With the aim of comparing Shinn's conclusions with those emerging from my work, I hereafter present two interview accounts. Both stories demonstrate that a growing sense of meaning experienced by individuals entering ISKCON is linked with the development of a deeper level of acceptance of the sets of oppositions associated with the ritual practice.

In the early stage, the ritual practice is usually performed without fully understanding the meaning of the chanting or the significance of the prohibitions. At this stage the understanding of the principles behind the practice is often superficial; the chanting and following of prohibitions is basically accepted on faith. Still, at this stage adherents also exhibit an increasing eagerness to understand the meaning of the ritual practice, an enthusiasm that over time nurtures a deeper understanding and leads to a thoughtful acceptance of the principles of purity and pollution. For adherents the combination of chanting and adherence to the prohibitions becomes a means of purifying their consciousness from attachment to sensory enjoyment, which is a prerequisite for developing attachment to Krishna. This conviction is an indication of

further incorporation. It leads the adherent to dedicate him/herself to a deeper absorption in the ritual practice, which, according to the interviewees, causes the gradual development of feelings of detachment and increased self-control. As they notice these changes, adherents feel the need, especially in terms of future developments, to understand their own experiences and to determine how to continue acting in the world while having them. Such experiences, understood to be the effects of ritual practice, involve a second level in the search for meaning: the inner experience of change nurtures a growing sense of meaning and a desire to be guided by a guru and scriptures to satisfy that search for meaning. Thus we have an ongoing quest kept alive by newly emerging experiences and the need to understand them.

Tony's Story

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, p.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.¹⁶⁶

This change in worldview is indicative of the attainment of a deeper level of incorporation. Serving as a *brahmachari* 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.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Interviewed on November 24, 2011.

¹⁶⁷ Interviewed on November 24, 2011.

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.

Maryla's Story

Another example of an unbroken search for meaning emerges most emphatically from Maryla's account. Her seeking was initially only focused on an intellectual engagement with ISKCON's philosophy. Marlya (Polish, aged 38, and an ISKCON devotee for five years) maintained that it was her acceptance of ISKCON's soteriology that provided strong arguments which induced her to take up the ritual practice and accept the beliefs. Without her acceptance of the law of karma and the principles leading to liberation she would not have committed herself to continue the practice of austerities and the daily chanting of the prescribed rounds of the Hare Krishna mantra. In her view, accepting these injunctions would have been pointless had she not understood the philosophy behind them. Maryla is the only interviewee who claimed awareness of ISKCON's soteriology before taking up the ritual practice. In general, the interviews indicate that the assimilation of the belief system and worldview followed the ritual practice.

Many expressions, emerging from the majority of interviews, demonstrate the importance of accepting the principles governing the sets of opposition. The primary

sign of incorporation into ISKCON is that individuals implicitly recognise the principles sustaining the sets of oppositions which govern the primary schemes of ritualisation.¹⁶⁸ Interviewees often emphasized that they would not have agreed to continue the ritual practice and follow the prohibitions, had such practice been disconnected from the theory of the eternal metaphysical self and the doctrine of karma and rebirth. Interviewees gradually became very conscious of the principles of karma, rebirth and the existence of a metaphysical self, which are all basic structuring elements of the primary schemes. Maryla expressed her belief in the principles of purity and pollution affecting the future of the metaphysical individual:

I became convinced that the practice of Krishna consciousness is the only path. That conviction was for me very much related to the understanding that I am the soul.¹⁶⁹

Maryla's entry into ISKCON became strongly linked with a construction of meaning based on the acceptance of the tradition's soteriology. This acceptance, resulting from a process of rationally calculating the merits of the doctrine of salvation, led her to decide to accept the teachings as reliable. Maryla's self-interest was vested in her acceptance of the merits of the doctrine of salvation, which she experienced as an affirmation of her faith that the chanting would free her from future suffering.

By reading the tradition's scriptures, Maryla developed a desire to practice the philosophy. While the process of "seeking" usually calls for a construction of meaning, the ways in which the individual becomes engaged in the ritual practice often involves a certain level of reflection. While chanting a fixed number of rounds on her beads daily, Maryla gradually developed the desire to understand her own experiences of becoming progressively disengaged from worldly attachments. In

¹⁶⁸ Analysing the rituals of a particular funeral service, Geertz (1973, pp.153-162) concludes that its failure is due to the collapse of implicit identification of sets of oppositions.

¹⁶⁹ Interviewed on January 22, 2012.

addition, she felt the need for guidance on how to cope with her deep and growing engagement with Krishna-focused activities. She intensified her study of ISKCON's books to understand her experiences in terms of Chaitanya Vaishnava theology and started searching for an ISKCON guru who could advise her on how to increase her mental concentration and self-control through the practice of chanting Krishna's names. In her interview, Maryla shares the following experience:

The whole perspective of the world began to change (as in *Gita* 2.69). Things which were important, or seemed to be, began to fade away. But that was a very slow process I am in still: losing attachments.¹⁷⁰

After complying with the institutional conditions, Maryla received initiation from an ISKCON guru and became submerged in a deeper study of the tradition's scriptures, a progressive study she still continues today. Moreover, she currently teaches the tradition's scriptural basis to young adherents.

The inquisitiveness of those with a Hindu upbringing, although initially often focused on trying to make sense of what their Hindu faith background was, shows a similar progression. For Prasun (English, aged 42, and an ISKCON devotee for over twenty years),¹⁷¹ the soteriology, the theory of karma, the ontology of the self all made sense. He claimed: "There was literally no question anymore to be asked in terms of understanding the Hindu culture where I came from." Prasun's comment seems to indicate that individuals with a Hindu-British background are concerned with a search that is aimed at establishing their Hindu identity.¹⁷² During their search they accept the same theological assumptions associated with the sets of opposition outlined earlier,

¹⁷⁰ Interviewed on January 22, 2012.

¹⁷¹ Interviewed on January 12, 2012.

¹⁷² As Kurien (2002, p.102) (and others) note, the traditions, cultures and religions of Indian immigrants have been subject to negotiation in order to construct ethnic identities appropriate to their new surroundings.

centred on ISKCON'S views on purity and pollution. Later they also progress to the second level in the search for meaning (seeking an explanation for their experiences of increased self-control, detachment and happiness).

The data effectively demonstrates that ISKCON entrants are active meaning-seeking agents, often possessing a strong ability to reflect on the course their lives are taking. The relation between ISKCON's soteriology and the concepts of karma, rebirth etc., which form the basis of the polarity of purity and pollution sustaining the primary sets of oppositions, provides adherents with a sense of an ordering of relations. Thus they envision the efficacy of their ritual practice within the boundaries of that ordering of relations. The acceptance of these boundaries is subject to a gradual process of reconstructing reality, using ISKCON's doctrinal and ritual frameworks. Burrige (1969, pp.6-7) sees this as a "redemptive process", a way to enable people to guarantee that "they are perceiving the truth of things". He argues that it represents a way for people to construe power relations and allows them to have "a sense of their place within some ordering of relations" in which "they can envision the efficacy of acting within that ordering of relations".

During the process of incorporation, moreover, entrants make a number of consecutive commitments to different elements of Krishna devotion. The majority of interview stories show a three-step commitment pattern. First, as we have already seen, the neophyte submits to ISKCON's schemes of ritual practice and embraces ISKCON's devotional belief system. This is usually followed by the second step: the individual's dedication to the institution of ISKCON and its mission. While serving the mission, most persons take the third step and decide to follow the procedure for becoming an initiated adherent. Usually this decision goes hand in hand with developing a relationship with an ISKCON guru, a development which ultimately

leads to receiving initiation and becoming an initiated member of ISKCON. The story of Bartek demonstrates this scheme most clearly.

Bartek's first contacts with the Hare Krishna movement go back to 1994, the year in which he received a copy of ISKCON's *Bhagavad Gita*. His interest in *Bhagavad Gita* led him to attend regular Sunday programmes at the local ISKCON temple. In July 1996, when Bartek had become familiar with the devotional practice, he committed himself to the devotional yoga process, in particular to regularly chanting the Hare Krishna mantra and following the four regulative principles.

In 1998, Bartek took up services such as editing a Polish ISKCON magazine and corresponding with people who were interested in yoga. His commitment to ISKCON's mission and practices significantly increased in 1999 when Jaya Gauranga Swami accepted him as an aspiring disciple. In 2000, after having gone through the required procedures, and right after his initiation, Bartek took responsibility for organising the weekly Sunday Feast programme, managing the kitchen which prepared meals for two hundred people during a yearly festival in Poland, and translating the *Adi Parva* section of the *Mahabharata* from English to Polish. Bartek's story shows various levels of commitments at different times. His initial commitment was to practicing *bhakti-yoga* (i.e., chanting and following the restrictions), subsequently he began to dedicate his time and energy to serve ISKCON, and only afterwards did he decide to follow the procedure to receive initiation from an ISKCON guru. These various levels of dedication took place at distinct moments. The second level of commitment (i.e., involvement in organisational activity) is often perceived in terms of service rendered to an ISKCON guru, to ISKCON's mission, or both. In some cases individuals engage in such activities to please local ISKCON leaders from whom they expect to receive a recommendation for initiation. Such

activity often implies a forced commitment, and sometimes the meaning-seeking agency of ISKCON entrants is at odds with their blindness to the power of the schemes to reproduce reality. Geertz (1980, pp.123-124; 130-131) suggests that the ability to define an order as “the real” is a form of control that produces a blindness that is not experienced as such by the people involved. This issue will be further discussed in the following section.

5.2. Misrecognition and Blindness

Bell (1992, p.114) claims that the relationship between what agents do and do not see infuses them with a sense of ritual. This section discusses the blindness of adherents (i.e., what they do not see) and examines crucial aspects of what they discern (i.e., what they do see). I will look at how adherents construct meaning and analyse how seekership leads entrants to accept the sets of oppositions that govern the schemes of ritualisation. Furthermore, I will show that as recruits surrender to the ritual practice, they demonstrate awareness of certain schemes of ritualisation but blindness to others. I will also argue that adherents generally do not see that they themselves project these schemes of ritualisation through everything they do, and through their modes of perceiving and ordering the world around them.

For ISKCON entrants, Chaitanya theology represents elementary structured dispositions, proclivities crucial for the ritual practice to reorder and reinterpret their environment. The acceptance of these dispositions, if understood in relationship with the ritual practice, illustrates a crucial aspect of the individual’s agency, and reflects the centrality of ritualisation as a strategy in making processes of internalisation possible through a hierarchy of schemes. The main elements that indicate the incorporation of entrants are: (1) their acceptance of the theory of karma, (2) their

belief that the metaphysical self undergoes a cycle of rebirth and (3) their linking of these ideas with ISKCON's rules relating to purity and pollution. Recruits subscribe to the idea that by chanting, practising daily rituals of worship, and following ISKCON's prohibitions, they will become purified, and freed from lust, anger, greed, envy, attachment and the desire for worldly enjoyment, and that by neglecting these practices, they will become polluted. Through a reflective and active meaning-seeking process, they connect philosophical/theological assumptions with the sets of oppositions governing the schemes of ritualisation. Despite acknowledging these sets of oppositions associated with purity and pollution, recruits do not express any significant awareness of their submission to schemes of ritualisation. I will identify different levels of blindness to such schemes and will discuss them on the basis of Bell's analysis of the ritualisation process.

Bell (1992, pp.140-142) maintains that ritualisation causes ritual practitioners to reinterpret their environment once they have internalized and assimilated the schemes of ritualisation. The reproduction of the environment, and the creation of dispositions (worldview, ethos, values and moral principles) is constantly reinforced by the cyclic effect of ritual practice. Regular repetition of ritual action usually generates ideologically-related convictions which are then projected onto others and onto the environment. Through such projections and through continuous reabsorption of these schemes as reflecting the nature of reality, a ritual gains the power to do what it does. Furthermore, Bell (1992, p.170) suggests that ritualisation does not control individuals or a society but rather forms a "strategic arena for the embodiment of power relations". In ISKCON, ritual practice, based on the primary sets of oppositions between purity and pollution, constitutes such a "strategic arena". In chapter four these sets have been classified as horizontal (Brahminical purity versus non-Brahminical pollution) and vertical (i.e., hierarchical) schemes of oppositions.

Combined they form a domain in which other (subordinate) schemes operate and execute power. Subordinate (strategic) schemes are based on ideological elements, proselytising strategies, insiders' attitudes towards their own previous beliefs, or towards the world outside ISKCON; these subordinate schemes depend on, and function within, the arena formed by the primary sets of oppositions. Both principal and subordinate schemes are internalized by practitioners. The subordinate schemes use the arena of the primary schemes to impress their principles on the individual. A crucial question is whether ISKCON entrants see themselves as projecting schemes or, as stated by Bell (1992, p.206), only act "in a socially instructive response to how things are, and do not recognize the source and arbitrariness of the schemes." In the following section I assess ISKCON adherents' awareness of the primary schemes and examine their level of blindness to the subordinate ones.

5.2.1. The Primary Schemes

Considering Bell's (1992, p.87) argument that "ritual practice does not see the strategies it uses to produce what it actually does accomplish", the question emerges whether ISKCON adherents see themselves projecting ISKCON's schemes of ritualisation. Bell's statement is based on insights derived from Althusser's and Balibar's (1979, pp.21-22) work *Reading Capital*, a foundational text of the school of structuralist Marxism. They argue that individuals who practice rituals do not recognise the dynamics of how the practice actually produces results. The following observations are based on an analysis of interview data which focused on measuring to what extent adherents were aware of ISKCON's primary schemes of oppositions. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, most interviewees were mindful of the fact that their emphatic determination to adhere to the prohibitions was the cause of their dissociation from former social circles. The story of Rafael, analysed in the previous

chapter, clearly shows how he deliberately shunned all contact with his foster family for a number of years for fear of becoming “contaminated”. Interviewees generally demonstrate awareness of the restrictions sustained by the polarity of purity and pollution. They are very conscious of the prohibitions and their significance for the efficacy of the chanting; in other words, they are deeply aware of the *horizontal* polarity-based schemes and distinctions.

An examination of the participants’ awareness of the *vertical* schemes yields different results. Within the framework of ISKCON, the vertical schemes involve hierarchical oppositions of superior versus inferior, ritual specialist or initiated adherent versus neophyte or novice. This disparity produces schemes that encourage individuals to strive for brahminhood, a qualification obtained by gaining proficiency in ritual mastery. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, such schemes are governed by strict institutional policies. Among the forty interviewees, only one individual, Laura, expressed awareness of the institutional control on initiation policies. It is notable that she remained at the fringe of ISKCON’s social and communal life. Laura said,¹⁷³ “You see, I do not like to mix my belief or faith with the name of the organisation. I accept the entire body of Chaitanya Vaishnava teachings. However, I do not accept ISKCON’s policies.” Laura’s dissatisfaction with ISKCON goes back to the 1980s, a time when many newly appointed ISKCON gurus deviated from their vows and left the movement. These deviations, combined with the rise of cases of child abuse and gross mismanagement, caused havoc in the lives of many ISKCON adherents. Since the GBC failed to prevent these disasters, many adherents, including Laura, developed distrust in ISKCON’s authority as an institution. According to Burke Rochford’s (1999, p.7) study, distrust in ISKCON’s leadership is an attitude shared by many ISKCON members. Apart from Laura, no other interviewee showed

¹⁷³ Interviewed on January 22, 2012.

any explicit awareness of the schemes and forces that moves recruits through the hierarchy from novice to Brahmin initiate. In general, it seems that while adherents submit themselves to the initiation procedures (which the institution continuously redesigns), there is no indication that they consciously see that in effect they are submitting themselves to a powerful elite leadership that endorses the process of ritual practice which recruits have to follow to gain, primarily, proficiency in ritual mastery. This is in keeping with Bell (1992, pp.210-211), who notes that misrecognition makes ritualisation effective. It presumes a collective illusion among participants that encourages them to consent to the ritual practice, “usually by stressing the personal advantages to be had or cost to be incurred by not consenting.”

As demonstrated in Chapter Four, as an institution ISKCON uses the vertical schemes of opposition to exert power by controlling the procedures and policies of entry. This reflects Bell’s (1992, p.196) assertion that “ritual practices are themselves the very production and negotiation of power relations.” The institutionalised process, rooted in the principles set forward by Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhanta during the second half of the 19th century, aims at producing faithful adherents surrendered to ISKCON and its mission. ISKCON entrants do not express awareness of the aims behind the institutional policies. They see their entry into ISKCON as following the practice of *bhakti* rather than as surrendering to institutional control that turns them into instruments directed by ISKCON gurus who operate within the boundaries of institutional policies. The following section discusses disparate forms of blindness to the subordinate schemes.

5.2.2. *Blindness to Ritualisation Schemes*

Ritualisation results in participants internalising the principles of the environment being delineated. In ISKCON's case, these principles, explained in detail in the previous chapter, 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 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, p.99) argues, involve a circular process that tends to be unrecognized. 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.¹⁷⁴ 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

¹⁷⁴ Ritualisation produces a ritualised person through the interaction of the body (or person) with a structured and structuring environment. In Bourdieu's (1977, p.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".

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. Some examples of this will follow.

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 schemes discussed in the previous chapter were predominantly based either on ideological or social-hierarchical dispositions. 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*.¹⁷⁵

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

¹⁷⁵ Bartek; interviewed on October 9, 2011.

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.¹⁷⁶

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.¹⁷⁷

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 (2012d): "Every religion teaches how to love God more or less. That is the only aim" (Lecture in London, August 27, 1971). And Bhaktivedanta (2012c): "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 (2012c): "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 (2012m) 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

¹⁷⁶ Rafael; interviewed on January 28, 2012.

¹⁷⁷ Victor; interviewed on October 30, 2011.

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.

As shown previously, the schemes associated with ISKCON’s restrictions and taboos may cause separation of the novice from previous circles or communities and may encourage integration and social solidarity within the ISKCON community. ISKCON’s schemes or strategies of differentiation lead to a growing distrust of society and an increasing trust in scriptural tradition. Based on the theological principles that explain the prohibitions, and with overtones of strong scepticism, Bhaktivedanta’s commentaries on the *Bhagavata Purana* often portray the leaders of modern society as unreliable. The following commentaries on verses 4.22.33 and 5.2.1 of the *Bhagavata Purana* are typical examples:

Just contrary to the principles mentioned here, the presidents and chief executives in the age of Kali (age of quarrel) are simply tax collectors who do not care whether religious principles are observed. Indeed, the chief executives of the present day introduce all kinds of sinful activity, especially illicit sex, intoxication, animal killing and gambling . . . in contrast to the principles of the kings of old India, the modern state is concerned only with propaganda for levying taxes and is no longer responsible for the spiritual welfare of the citizens. The state is now callous to religious principles . . . modern heads of state are rogues and thieves who plunder the citizens instead of giving them protection. Rogues and thieves plunder without regard for law, but in this age of Kali, as stated in *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, the lawmakers themselves plunder the citizens. (Bhaktivedanta, 2012m)

One who is constantly thinking of activities to earn money and gratify the senses is following a path which is suicidal. Factually all human society is following this path. (Bhaktivedanta, 2012m)

The following excerpts demonstrate similar negative views on modern society expressed by adherents:

What I found most appealing experiences when I came in contact with ISKCON were the reading of the scriptures and the views of the world; especially how to save the world from its suicidal course. The question that became important for me was how to make others realise this movement is actually deeply concerned with everyone's well being. It possesses spiritual techniques to bring about a revolution in this world's misdirected civilisation.¹⁷⁸

What attracted me were the complete life-styles, the inquiry and travelling with different people. Seeing the suffering state of society and observing their ignorance, filled me with compassion. It inspired me to help them by delivering Krishna's message.¹⁷⁹

Kris's view of the world as "misdirected" and "on a suicidal course", and Tony's statement of "society in a state of ignorance", reflect Bhaktivedanta's statements, which are based on the acceptance of Chaitanya Vaishnava views derived from the *Bhagavata Purana*. Among psychologists who have done research on the mental

¹⁷⁸ Kris; interviewed on April 14, 2012.

¹⁷⁹ Tony; interviewed on November 24, 2011.

health of ISKCON members, Weiss (1987) and Comrey inferred that the majority of ISKCON members exhibit a reduced trust in society. The above excerpts corroborate their findings. Interviewees seldom referred to Bhaktivedanta and his critical views on modern society when they expressed their own mistrust in society. Repeated exposure to Bhaktivedanta's critical views on society induces adherents to accept Bhaktivedanta's commentaries as facts. Identifying Bhaktivedanta's views as reality, they often do not communicate the particular, and historically specific, source of their understanding when they express their viewpoints on western civilisation.

A further type of misrecognition concerns ISKCON adherents' blindness to strategy-based schemes. Within the ISKCON framework, strategy-based schemes evolve from a dialectical relation between ritual practice and structured dispositions. These dispositions are linked to ISKCON's proselytising strategies, such as ISKCON's implicit policy on entrants' previous beliefs. This tacit policy on former faiths represents a set of dispositions that support the ritual practice to produce and project particular schemes, which aim at converting an adherent's experience of reality.

To demonstrate Bhaktivedanta's strategy of seeing the Christian practice of prayer as a Vaishnava practice of chanting Krishna's names, I refer to an encounter between Bhaktivedanta and a Christian monk and the conversation they had. In 1974, in Frankfurt an Main (Germany), Bhaktivedanta had a morning walk with Emmanuel Jungclausen, a Benedictine monk from Niederalteich Monastery. During the walk father Emmanuel chanted a prayer on his rosary, which, in translation, means, "Lord Jesus Christ, be merciful unto us". Bhaktivedanta chanted the Hare Krishna mantra. The following conversation ensued:

Father Emmanuel: I think Jesus, as the son of God, has revealed to us the actual name of God: Christ. We can call God “Father”, but if we want to address Him by His actual name, we have to say ‘Christ’.

Bhaktivedanta: Yes. “Christ” is another way of saying Krishna, and “Krista” (or “Christ”) is another way of pronouncing Krishna, the name of God (Bhaktivedanta, 2012f).

Bhaktivedanta did not encourage novices to abandon their previous faith but persuaded them to see their former belief through the principles of Krishna consciousness. He used a strategy aimed at those with a Christian background. While portraying Jesus Christ as an example of a Vaishnava dedicated to the mission of spreading Krishna consciousness, Bhaktivedanta praised Jesus Christ for his tolerance and compassion, and he depicted him as a person fervently opposed to animal slaughter. As such, he used Jesus Christ’s teachings as evidence that the Old Testament commandment “Thou shalt not kill” refers not only to humans, but to all creatures, including plants and animals. Furthermore, Bhaktivedanta presented Christ as the “son of God”, or one who always remembered Krishna, his “eternal father”. In this way, Jesus Christ was identified as a pure Vaishnava who adhered to Vaishnavism’s moral principles, restrictions and prohibitions required for appropriate ritual action. Moreover, he was believed to internally have attained the platform of always feeling united in love with Krishna, an achievement the tradition points to as the goal of chanting.

This blending of Krishna and Christ, and indeed of Chaitanya Vaishnava concepts and practices with Christian dispositional thoughts and actions, results in a particular attitude within ISKCON where the insider accepts his/her Christian beliefs as bona fide only when they are seen through the framework of Chaitanya Vaishnava theology. In this case, dispositional views on Jesus Christ fuse with the concept of an ideal Vaishnava. This reflects Bourdieu’s (as cited in Bell: 1992, pp.87-97; 118-120;

123-124) analysis of how an individual's perception of reality is reproduced. The system of classifying schemes of Vaishnava theology becomes an instrument for re-ordering the person's Christian worldviews. An enduring projection of Vaishnava views, sustained by ritual practice, enables the reproduction of the individual's (pre-ISKCON) Christian environment in such a way that s/he experiences the personality of Jesus Christ as that of a pure Vaishnava. Jesus Christ now becomes the embodiment of Vaishnava ideals.

Many ISKCON adherents derive their ideas about Christianity from Bhaktivedanta's statements on Jesus Christ. Some conclude that: "by serving Jesus I am serving Krishna",¹⁸⁰ or "Jesus was my first guru who brought me to Krishna".¹⁸¹ In other words, Jesus Christ becomes an intermediary between them and Krishna. In addition, they feel that because they are now strictly following the Ten Commandments, particularly the fifth ("Thou shall not kill"), they have become "true" Christians. For them Jesus Christ becomes an example of one who followed the prohibitions necessary for effective ritual practice. These principles construct a framework for schemes, which, if repeatedly projected and absorbed, gradually changes a person's views on his or her own identity as a Christian. By projecting these schemes on themselves and on others, adherents become convinced that they have become true followers of Jesus Christ who strictly follow the Ten Commandments.

It is noteworthy that Bhaktivedanta did not strip candidate initiates of their previous Christian identities. Rather, he transformed their identities by convincing them that Jesus was a Vaishnava and that his teachings were in agreement with the tenets of Chaitanya Vaishnavism. Novices from Christian backgrounds allowed these

¹⁸⁰ Rafael; interviewed on January 28, 2012.

¹⁸¹ Caroline; interviewed on December 4, 2011.

views to reframe and embed their faith in a Chaitanya Vaishnava theological context. It is noteworthy that eighteen out of the twenty-six interviewees from Christian backgrounds had never practised their Christian religion, nor did they have any substantial knowledge of Christian theology. Many allowed the Chaitanya Vaishnava principles to frame their understanding of Christianity, without examining Christian theological positions on these and related issues. This indicates, at least in part, a blind assimilation of ISKCON's dispositional attitudes and frameworks.

Another form of blindness, that can be explained in a similar way, is the absorption of adherents in strategy-based schemes related to ISKCON's programme of book distribution. ISKCON's method of book distribution as a prosyletising strategy forms the basis for another set of structured dispositions, which, if combined with the ritual practice, produce particular strategy-based schemes. Only a small number of interviewees referred to schemes associated with book distribution. Interviewees generally did not refer to their engagement in book distribution as a significant factor that made them *join* the movement. Rather, they shared their recollection of how they received a book and thus *came in contact with* ISKCON. Given the relative importance of book distribution, I will mention it briefly as it is a factor that influences other schemes. All schemes of ritualisation are to a certain extent interrelated. Novices engaged in book distribution, for instance, are likely to find it easier and quicker to achieve "promotion" to higher rungs of the ISKCON social ladder. Below I provide a summary of the strategy.

In his commentary to *Bhagavad Gita* 2.41, Bhaktivedanta writes: "One should accept the instruction of the bona fide spiritual master as one's mission in life." And the following quotes demonstrate how Bhaktivedanta instructed his disciples to take book distribution as an important mission in life:

“I want that all my students, shall very vigorously try for this book distribution.”
(Letter to Kirtiraja Dasa, 27 November 1971 (Bhaktivedanta, 2012)).

“If you simply push on this one activity of distributing my books, all success will be there” (Letter to Lalita Kumar Dasa, 15 November 1971) (Bhaktivedanta, 2012).

“Whatever progress we made is simply due to distributing books. So go on and do not divert your mind a moment from this” (Letter to Ramesvara Dasa, 11 October 1974) (Bhaktivedanta, 2012).

“So, Krishna immediately recognizes a preacher of Krishna consciousness who takes all risks to deliver His message” (Letter to Uttamasloka Dasa, December 1975) (Bhaktivedanta, 2012).

These extracts show how Bhaktivedanta presented book distribution as a means to attain perfection. Focusing on Bhaktivedanta’s instructions, many novices dedicate themselves for several months, even years, to book distribution. Based on their faith in Bhaktivedanta’s words, they are confident that this activity will bring them to the desired state of spiritual perfection. In other words, they see the end but not how it affects them in the process of realising it. They accept it, because it is legitimised by “superior authority”. Through this scheme they experience their actions as sanctioned by powers beyond human activity, that is, as sanctioned by the Divine and mediated by a line of predecessor gurus. A number of interviewees echoed the views expressed by Laura (34, Czech Republic), that book distribution became a fascinating experience in itself: “My first and most appealing experience was *sankirtana* (book distribution): giving out the mercy of the Lord and receiving His mercy in return”. ISKCON adherents engaged in book distribution share their experiences on websites.¹⁸² As Bell (1992, pp. 108-109) argues ritualised agents see the purpose of their practice and accept rituals as a means to attain it. Yet, they do not see what they actually do in

¹⁸² A frequently visited website glorifying book distribution is <http://www.iskconbooks.com/Global-Inspirational-Stories.aspx>; last accessed on 4 April 2015.

ritually transforming the situation. This is based on Foucault's principle: "People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is *what-they-do* does" (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983, p.187).

From the cases explained before, it becomes clear that schemes generate other schemes. On the basis of the primary schemes of opposition other secondary schemes are produced. Bourdieu (as cited in Bell: 1992, p.78) notes that ritual practice produces a continual new state of "habitus", which in turn creates new sets of "habitual dispositions". The power of ritual action to create new schemes depends on existing and often prevailing structured dispositions. This is because schemes of ritualisation, in keeping with Bourdieu's point, are generated from a dialectical relation between ritual practice and a set of structured dispositions. By means of regular ritual practice, an individual creates secondary schemes which generate norms of behaviour. These norms relate to the assimilation of values, which often correlate to psychological conditions, such as losing worldly attachments, attaining peace and equanimity of mind, increasing mental capabilities, improved relationships, developing humble and tolerant attitudes and giving up superfluous desires. The effects of such schemes – effects produced in synergy with repeated projections of primary, ideological and other schemes – are explained as having derived from a supreme divine authority. With regard to the power derived from adopting ritual schemes, Bell (1992, p.115) states that many theorists became frustrated in their attempts to explain the efficacy of ritual practice. Bloch (1987, pp.271-297), for instance, declares that scholars such as Durkheim, Geertz, and others never explain why ritual has the power to do what is said it does.

Bell maintains that "legitimation is one of the powerful things that ritual does" (Bell, 1992, p.196). Ritualisation, she claims, is a strategic arena for the embodiment

of power. Legitimation is one of the ways in which ritual exerts power. It tends to make ritual practice effective as a means of social control (ibid, p.221). Many theories see ritual as a form of social control acting through cultural strategies concerned with ideology, legitimation and power (ibid, p.272). Bell (ibid, pp.88-89) states that most studies that use the term “ritualisation” are concerned with legitimation and internalisation of values. She argues that ritualisation involves “the legitimation of an ordering of power as an assumption for the ways things really are” (Ibid, p.170). It interprets its own schemes as impressed upon the actors from a more authoritative source, usually from beyond the immediate human community itself” (ibid, p.109). ISKCON legitimises the ritualisation process on the basis of the theology and epistemology explained in the second chapter. ISKCON adherents in turn accept these divine powers as the source of the ritual practice’s transformational power. This resonates with Bell’s (1992, p.182) statement that “schemes tend to be experienced as deriving powers or realities beyond the community and its activities, such as god or tradition, thereby depicting and testifying to be the ultimate organisation of the cosmos.”

This is clear in the case of ritual chanting and its perceived effects. The following quotes reflect interviewees’ perceptions that by chanting, one loses one’s worldly attachments and becomes more balanced and peaceful in mind:

One of the major changes occurring when I started to practice the chanting and following the restrictions was that things which were important or seemed to be began to fade away. But that was a very slow process. I am still in the process of losing attachments.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Maryla; interviewed on January 22, 2012.

I began also practicing mantra meditation, which calmed down my mind. I became more steady and balanced.¹⁸⁴

My attachment to material desires and objects for the senses gradually decreased.¹⁸⁵

Chaitanya Vaishnava theology explains the effects of the chanting, such as decreased attachments to sensual enjoyment and increased mental capabilities, as a purification of the mind from lust, anger and greed. The following quote is an example of the myriad of references in Bhaktivedanta's commentaries on this subject:

No one can give rapt attention who is not pure in mind. No one can be pure in mind who is not pure in action. No one can be pure in action who is not pure in eating, sleeping, fear and mating (*Bhagavata Purana* 1.3.4, commentary) (Bhaktivedanta, 2012m).

Bhaktivedanta sees a connection between the ability to attentively hear a message and strictly following the prohibitions. "Pure in eating" refers to refraining from the consumption of meat, eggs, fish and any form of intoxication; "pure in mating" means avoiding illicit sex. Bhaktivedanta's teachings are intended to explain how adhering to the prohibitions affects one's awareness and abilities. These connections, which to a certain extent may be psychologically confirmed, are ingrained in the consciousness of adherents who accept them as fact.¹⁸⁶

Yet, how exactly the chanting produces the effect of losing attachments, invoking capabilities, giving up desires for enjoyment and attaining peace remains to a certain extent a mystery. In his commentary on *Bhagavad Gita* 10.11, Bhaktivedanta states that one who is sincerely engaged in Krishna consciousness is helped by Krishna from within the heart. Krishna takes charge of his surrendered devotee, who

¹⁸⁴ Bartek; interviewed on October 9, 2011.

¹⁸⁵ Victor; interviewed on October 30, 2011.

¹⁸⁶ This corroborates with Geuss (1981, pp.71-74), who argues that ideology is a strategy intimately connected with legitimation.

thus becomes completely free from materialistic desires (Bhaktivedanta, 2012c). In this way, adherents legitimise Krishna as the supreme authority and agent,¹⁸⁷ and in doing so, demonstrate a certain level of blindness to other possible (more mundane) explanations of how ritual might alter states of consciousness and help them to cultivate the desired values.

5.3. Conclusions

I have demonstrated in this chapter how individuals entering ISKCON claim to experience a growing sense of meaning. My research supports Shinn's findings that entry into ISKCON is a transformative process entailing an enduring search for meaning. Even if their entry is sudden, entrants go through a long process of incorporation, which involves seekership and the making of consecutive commitments. In addition, my findings demonstrate that adherents exhibit a general blindness to the subordinate schemes, a blindness which mainly manifests in three forms: (1) a denial of the source of arbitrariness of the schemes; (2) a failure to see themselves as projecting these ritualisation schemes; and (3) an inability to explain the process by which the ritual practice produces results. An exception to this blindness is the adherents' awareness of the sets of oppositions that empower the horizontal primary schemes.

Bell (1992, 114) stresses that the relationship between seeing and not seeing (blindness to the schemes) is responsible for the production of agents "embodying a sense of ritual constituted by and expressed in particular schemes of ritualisation". The schemes of ritualisation are an expression of a ritual sense in the agents'

¹⁸⁷ Pye (2000, pp. 39-46) maintains that "when power is seen as external to the actor it renders cause and effect so complicated that the process is invisible".

awareness, demonstrated by their acceptance of ideological elements and their blindness to the schemes. These observations in turn give rise to important questions about the agency of individuals entering ISKCON. Chapter Six will look at the process of entry from a sociological perspective and will examine whether incorporation within ISKCON and its ritualisation processes can be understood to entail “inculturation”. I will examine the extent to which entrants can be understood as passive “victims”, or alternatively, as active agents authoring their own religious lives in particular ways.

Chapter Six: ISKCON Entrants and Agency

This chapter is concerned with the agency of ISKCON entrants. It analyses crucial aspects of the entry process in terms of the converts' passivity ('inculturation' models) or active agency ('social drift' models), a polarity central to debates in the scholarship on conversion. In this chapter I will argue that the process of entry into ISKCON and assimilation of its ritualisation strategies is congruent with theories of gradual conversion (social drift models), entailing active agency on the part of the entrant.¹⁸⁸ To interpret the journey of individuals entering ISKCON, I have chosen two major conversion models here: those developed by J. Lofland and R. Stark (1962-65) and L. R. Rambo (1993). While Lofland and Stark's model is probably the most studied and tested conversion model, Rambo's system of seven stages is recognised as a comprehensive study of the conversion process.

6.1. Conversion Paradigms and Agency

6.1.1. *'Inculturation' and 'social drift'*

The "brainwashing" model, first promoted by psychiatrists and clinical psychologists (cf. Conway and Siegelman, 1979; Singer, 1983), is based on the view that members of religious movements use coercive methods to exercise mind control over new converts. These members are thought to strip new converts of their previous identities and re-programme them with cult beliefs. The converts are largely passive victims of such processes. To some extent, the "brainwashing" model builds on the conversion prototype of the old conversion paradigm (Richardson, 1985, pp.163-171) based on an

¹⁸⁸ During the twentieth century scholars developed thirteen main approaches to individual conversion (Gooren, 2010, p.19). These were developed by James (1985 [1902]); Lofland and Stark (1965); Travisano (1970); Straus (1979); Greil (1977); Heinrich (1977); Bromley and Shupe (1979); Long and Hadden (1987); Snow and Machalek (1983, 1984); Richardson (1985; 1980); Gartrell and Shannon (1985) and Stark and Finke (2000); and Rambo (1993).

interpretation of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, which perceived conversion as irrational, spectacular, instant and passionate. It became the archetype for a traditional paradigm characterized by a "passive subject converted by external powers". In theological terms, this conversion model is usually considered to be predestinational, but in psychological terms it is predispositional. The experience is deterministic and assumes a "passive subject" (ibid, p.164). For long scholars have viewed new religious movements as using manipulative and deceptive strategies aimed at seducing individuals into involvement.

Within Christian circles, however, there have also been views on conversion that emphasize the idea that individuals must "work out their own salvation". W. James (1985 [1902]) was one of the first to bring in the concept of "volitional conversion" as opposed to "the conversion of self-surrender". He introduced the seed of the new paradigm which sees the individual as an "active meaning-seeking subject" that exercises volition in deciding to convert. The 'social drift' model, mainly supported by sociologists (cf. Lofland and Stark, 1965; Richardson, 1985, 1980, 1978) suggests this more gradual process by which individuals become converts through their own volitional seeking as well as the influence of social relationships. Even though the two models may at first seem contradictory, in fact both have often been used in conjunction by scholars and in public debate. Scholars now recognize that there may be aspects of passivity as well as active agency in the conversion process, and that it may be both volitional and shaped by peer influence at the same time.

In the work of T. Long and J. Hadden, we see an effort to combine elements of the two models. They note that conversion models generally highlight two central aspects of the socialisation process: "group efforts to mould new members" (inculturation) as well as "new members' journey toward affiliation" (drift) (Long and

Hadden, 1983, pp.1-4). According to these scholars, both models are based on an erroneous model of socialisation and internalisation. They maintain that both views contain partial truths and that combining them offers a new research strategy for analysing entry into religious movements.

6.1.2. Extant Conversion Models

Since the 1960s sociologists have analysed and examined processes of conversion from a more holistic perspective and have formulated different conversion models that bring together in different combinations elements from both inculturation and drift paradigms. R. A. Straus (1979, pp.162-63), concerned with “how a person comes to be a seeker and then how the seeker goes about finding a more adequate world of everyday life”, developed a model in which he systematically outlines the typical patterns of religious seekers (preaffiliation, affiliation, conversion). Around the same time Richardson and Stewart (1978; 1980) coined the term “conversion career”, a label for the process of conversion and disaffiliation for people trying out religious alternatives. Also David Bromley and Anson Shupe looked into the process and based on a case study of young adults in the Unification Church in Texas divided the “affiliation process” into five conceptual components (predisposing factors, attraction, incipient involvement, active involvement, and commitment) (Bromley, 1979, p.167). Furthermore, they were amongst the first to discuss “disaffiliation”, that is, members walking away. Then, in 1983, Long and Hadden (1983, p.2) argued, as noted earlier, that all general conversion models “highlight two central aspects of socialisation process: group efforts to *mould new members* (inculturation model) and new members’ *journey toward affiliation* (drift model)” (emphasis in original).

Rambo (1993, pp.1-16) argues that conversion means a turning from and toward new religious groups, systems of beliefs, and modes of relating to a deity or the nature of reality. Recently, Gooren (2010, p.3), building on Rambo's psychological model of seven stages of conversion (Rambo 1993; 2003), presents a new way of looking at the conversion career as a process including various levels of increasing religious participation: preaffiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession, and finally disaffiliation.

Based on fieldwork conducted in 1962-1963 (i.e., interviews with converts to what later was revealed to be the Reverend Moon's Unification Church in San Francisco), Lofland and Stark (1965) came up with a motivational model of conversion. For my analysis, I have selected two key conversion models from the above-mentioned studies to discuss agency in relation to entry into ISKCON. These are the models developed by Lofland and Stark, and by Rambo.

Several scholars have used Lofland and Stark's model to explain how and why individuals enter religious movements.¹⁸⁹ For Lofland and Stark (1965, p.864) the process of conversion consists of a series of seven sequential stages leading to total commitment.¹⁹⁰ Lofland and Stark (1965) came up with the following motivational model for conversion.¹⁹¹

For conversion a person must:

1. Experience, enduring, acutely felt tensions;

¹⁸⁹ For instance, Hall (1998, pp.393-410) used Lofland and Stark's model for analysing motivations of individuals joining the Church of Scientology.

¹⁹⁰ The data Lofland and Stark (1965, p.863) gathered was collected between early 1962 and mid-1963. Out of twenty-one persons classified as converts, fifteen supplied full information on all seven factors.

¹⁹¹ Kox, Meeus, and 't Hart tested Lofland and Stark's model of religious conversion in a study among 92 Dutch adolescents. Their conclusion is that Lofland and Stark's model offers a fairly adequate set of conditions of conversions and predicts conversion to religious groups quite well. Yet, it is inadequate as a model for the process of conversion (Kox, 1991, pp.227-238).

2. Within a religious problem-solving perspective;
3. Which leads him to define as a religious seeker;
4. Encountering the D.P. (the cult) as a turning point in his or her life;
5. Wherein an affective bond is formed (or pre-exists) with one or more converts;
6. Where extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralized;
7. And, where, if he is to become a deployable agent, he is exposed to intensive interaction.¹⁹²

The Lofland and Stark model (1965, p.874) identifies seven conditions for conversion. While the first three conditions are referred to as “pre-disposing conditions” (ibid, p.864),¹⁹³ social interaction comes into play only in the next three conditions, which Lofland and Stark labelled as “situational contingencies” (ibid, p.870). The situational contingencies include a formation of an “affective bond” with adherents of the movement, or with the entire community, as well as a decrease of social interaction of the individual with his or her former social environment, which Lofland and Stark refer to as “extra-cult attachments”. The cases Lofland and Stark cite (1965, p.873) demonstrate that *extra-cult attachments* mainly refer to bonds with relatives strongly opposed to the individual’s affiliation with the religious movement. When such extra-cult attachments are too strong, then conversion, they claim, “was not consummated” (ibid, p.873). Lofland and Stark also maintain that total converts, whom they identify as “deployable agents”, are characterized by their exposure to intensive interaction.

¹⁹² Gooren (2010, pp.22-23) points out that in Lofland and Stark’s model, the social bonds with cult members and others (factor 5 & 6) is the prime component in conversion. After that the second component is personality, i.e., the individual undergoing tensions (factor 1). And the third component is the contingency element or the turning-point experience (factor 4).

¹⁹³ Bromley and Shupe, however, reject Lofland and Stark’s “motivational” model and claim that its focus on predispositions is inadequate. They look at the patterns of individuals who decided to get involved in a group, and conclude that the acceptance of beliefs often occurs later in the recruitment process. Their model is even more “activist” as they emphasise the “decision” to become involved in the role. Bromley and Shupe, based on a case study of young adults in the Unification Church in Texas, divided the “affiliation process” into five conceptual components (predisposing factors, attraction, incipient involvement, active involvement, and commitment) (Bromley, 1979, p.167).

The second model, that proposed by Rambo (1993), distinguishes four types of conversion specifically: apostasy, intensification, affiliation and institutional transition. In addition, he identifies six conversion motifs.¹⁹⁴ Making use of the disciplinary perspectives of psychology, sociology, anthropology and theology, Rambo proposes a conversion model of seven stages:

1. Context: the starting point;
2. Crisis: the phase of challenge characterized by destabilisation of their religious identity;
3. Quest: the person in crisis searches for alternative approaches;
4. Encounter: meeting with a devout active in the practice of the religion;
5. Interaction: the person spends time as guest or participant observer;
6. Commitment: the seeker formally, usually ritually, joins the new faith community;
7. Outcomes: the person participates fully in the new faith community (ibid, p. 4).

It is important to note that Rambo's model is based on two assumptions: first, that the individual has initial contact with an advocate persuading him or her to see the world in a new light, and second, that converts play an active role in the process of conversion.¹⁹⁵ Rambo's second assumption suggests that "seekership" and "commitment" are important features of the standard conversion process.

The position of both models within the history of conversion paradigms is indicative of their approach to agency. It was Lofland and Stark's (1965) conversion model that first bridged the old and new paradigm. Their model focuses on "the forces that might push a person into conversion" (Lofland and Stark, 1965, p.864). The stages of their model recognise that conversion has a "definite organisational" aspect

¹⁹⁴ Six conversion motifs: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive (Rambo, 1993, p.14).

¹⁹⁵ Rambo (1993, p.45) states that to be an active agent one must have ultimate control or the power to say "no".

and is a “social event” (Richardson, 1985, p.168). The social aspect arises from the assumption that individuals define themselves as “religious seekers” who actively change their situation through interaction with certain people. Thus, Lofland and Stark’s model contains both “deterministic” elements (Richardson, 1985, p.168) and elements that emphasize individual agency, thus opposing the old conversion paradigm. The deterministic elements seem to imply that the individual is a passive subject, as in enduring a crisis and being exposed to social pressure subsequent to the development of affective bonds with adherents.¹⁹⁶ The aspect of seekership, however, allows room for agency – through the portrayal of the individual as a “seeker” who interacts with the group and with others involved to fulfil his or her own personal quest. “Seekership” is a key element emerging from the Lofland and Stark model.

In Rambo’s model the first stage of “context”, despite its deterministic element, gives rise to a quest for meaning if it is combined with a “crisis”. That search for meaning, although indicative of active agency, becomes influenced by individual or group efforts directed towards convincing the individual to accept views congruent with the norms and values of group members. The entry into the group remains a process in which the individual, nourished by social interaction with adherents, actively steers his or her transformation/incorporation through seekership and commitment. Though not devoid of passive elements, Rambo’s model is closest to the category of social drift models representing the new conversion paradigm. Studying both Lofland and Stark’s, and Rambo’s, models brings us in line with Long and Hadden’s (1993, pp.1-4) conclusion that combining active and passive conversion

¹⁹⁶ Outlining social networks as the prime factor in conversion, Lofland and Stark’s model (Gooren, 2010, p.24) seems to be opposed to Travisano’s social-psychological model, which considers individual choice, strongly shaped by personality, to be the primary factor in conversion. This model maintains that conversion “involves the ubiquitous utilization of an identity”, which means that converts strive “to make their new identity central to almost all interactions” (Travisano, 1970, p.605). In addition, Lofland and Stark’s model has been criticized as being too specific, without empirical foundations (Snow and Machalek, 1984, p.184), too static and individualistic (Richardson and Stewart 1978, pp.28, 31).

paradigms offers a powerful strategy for analysing entry into religious movements. This justifies my choice to study the agency question in relation to ISKCON through these two conversion models. In the following sections I discuss certain factors of agency in the light of these models. Although the entry process has been thoroughly discussed in previous chapters, I will elaborate here on certain aspects in the light of Lofland and Stark's and Rambo's models of conversion as they might apply to the ISKCON context.

6.1.2.1. Seekership

The first common element of agency in both conversion models introduced in the last section is the search for meaning. Central to Lofland and Stark's predisposing conditions is a seekership engaged within a problem-solving perspective.¹⁹⁷ According to their model, the individual, prior to coming in contact with adherents, identifies himself or herself as a religious seeker. The previous chapter showed that throughout their entire incorporation process, ISKCON entrants experience an intensification of their search for meaning which is characterized by different levels of seekership. However, entry into the movement is not always the result of a combination of seekership with a crisis. Rather, an individual search for meaning often follows *after* the experience of ISKCON's ritual practice. The first ritual experience enhances the cultivation of this search for meaning and is an event that functions as a trigger to seek an understanding of the supporting beliefs. The apprehension of these beliefs in turn strengthens a person's commitment to the chanting, the *prasadam* experience and the practice of deity worship.

¹⁹⁷ According to Rambo (1993, p.44) "most scholars of conversion acknowledge that some form of crisis usually precedes conversion".

My research data demonstrates that only eighteen interviewees identified themselves as seekers before coming in contact with ISKCON. Among these was Maryla, for instance, who said: “I was on a search for the answer on the very basic question: who am I?”¹⁹⁸ Caroline straightforwardly disclosed that she was looking for the absolute truth,¹⁹⁹ and Laura declared: “For a long time I have been searching through different philosophies trying to find the right one to apply in my life”.²⁰⁰ While these interview snippets indicate a budding search for meaning before coming in contact with ISKCON, twenty-two interviewees, or fifty-five percent of the entire sample, maintain that their first contacts with ISKCON happened not because they were looking for answers but because they participated in ISKCON’s collective ritual events. What leads them to the initial participation in ISKCON events is very variable. Often it is due to a growing curiosity arising from reading ISKCON’s books or magazines; in some cases individuals respond to invitations from friends who are already adherents. These collective ritual events, as considered in the next section, involve different forms of social interaction. Thus, Lofland and Stark’s theory that potential converts identify themselves as “seekers” is not straightforwardly applicable to individuals entering ISKCON.

Additionally, within the framework of Lofland and Stark’s model, the search for meaning presupposes a link between a crisis and individual seekership. Lofland and Stark (1965, p.864) assume that the crisis, or problem-solving perspective, is sustained by a tension which is typified by a “felt discrepancy” between an imagined ideal situation and the circumstances in which a person sees himself or herself caught up. Examples of such crisis situations (again within the framework of Lofland and Stark’s research) were often related to frustrated sexual and marital relations,

¹⁹⁸ Maryla; interviewed on January 22, 2012.

¹⁹⁹ Caroline; interviewed on December 4, 2011.

²⁰⁰ Laura; interviewed on January 22, 2012.

homosexual guilt, acute fear of face-to-face interaction, etc. While these crises are of different natures and intensities, they generally point to severe forms of mental distress. Additionally, providing an argument in support of Lofland and Stark's reasoning, Rambo (ibid, p.56) claims that the process of construing meaning greatly intensifies during times of crisis. At variance with Rambo's and Lofland and Stark's argumentation, my interview data indicates that in general entry into ISKCON does not always follow from a prior crisis experience. Just three interviewees out of forty mentioned severe crisis situations.²⁰¹ Most interviewees did not mention crises at all. Caroline's quest, for instance, was driven by her willingness to undergo new experiences and her active search to give meaning to life. For Maryla and Tony there was no crisis, and their search for meaning was satisfied by their acceptance of ISKCON's philosophy, in particular Chaitanya Vaishnavism's soteriology and its relation with the theory of karma and rebirth.

As demonstrated in Chapter Four, when newcomers construe meaning, they accept the sets of oppositions that govern the schemes of ritualisation. This search for meaning is often triggered by questions arising at the time when those newcomers come in contact with the ritual practice. The proclaimed links between chanting, *prasadam* rites and freedom from karma and rebirth encouraged them to continue experimentation with the ritual practice. These factors may be seen as on a par with Rambo's (1993, p.44) second definition of crisis,²⁰² a turning point serving as a "trigger" that activates a quest for knowledge. He states that "it is easy to see that death, suffering, and other painful experiences can challenge one's interpretation of life, calling everything into question, but other events that appear to be rather insignificant may also eventually serve as triggers" (ibid, p.46).

²⁰¹ The aforementioned case of Tanja, who went through a severe depression before coming in contact with ISKCON, is one of the three cases involving a severe crisis.

²⁰² Rambo's (1993, p.44) first form of crisis relates to a confrontation with the death of others, the exposure to severe mental suffering, and other psychological experiences.

As shown previously, individuals who come in contact with the chanting and the *prasadam* rites generally become inquisitive about the meaning of the rituals and their associated beliefs. The following interview excerpts demonstrate that the inquisitiveness of the interviewees and the philosophical/theological answers they received served as a “turning point”, deepening their faith in and commitment to the daily practice:

The Law of Karma motivated me to commit myself to the practice of *bhakti*. The sentence “faith means unflinching trust in something sublime” describes the main impetus of my experimental and experiential commitment to the practice.²⁰³

The law of karma and transmigration of the soul through the cycle of birth and death gave me a broader understanding of spiritual life and a deeper understanding of issues concerned with ethics and morality. This additional understanding was supported by the spiritual nature experienced while chanting the *maha-mantra* Hare Krishna.²⁰⁴

The trigger effect refers, *inter alia*, to the inquisitiveness resulting from contact with the ritual practice of chanting and eating *prasadam*. In this regard, the search for meaning is a result, rather than a cause, of ritual action.²⁰⁵ This ritual action is the turning point that leads the individual towards pursuing seekership which culminates in a commitment to convert. That turning point, they claim, takes place because of situational contingencies, such as social interaction, or the formation of affective bonds, with adherents. Socialisation, resulting from an individual choice to socialise with adherents, is an important aspect of the agency of ISKCON entrants.

²⁰³ Albert (nationality: Belgium; age: 58); interviewed on November 6, 2011.

²⁰⁴ Bartek; interviewed on October 9, 2011.

²⁰⁵ Stewart and Strathern (2014, p.113) discuss a practice-oriented theory in which beliefs are a result rather than a cause or ritual practice.

6.1.2.2. Socialisation

Social interaction is without doubt a crucial factor in the entry process; however, it is insufficient to explain entry into ISKCON in terms of socialisation alone. It is mostly not the preaching tactics of an advocate that convinces an individual to stay in contact with ISKCON; rather, this conviction is chiefly derived from an attraction to chanting, experiencing *prasadam*, and practising deity worship. Furthermore, social interaction within an ISKCON context encourages seekership and living a life centred on ritual experience.

The role of the “advocate” is pivotal in the stages of Rambo’s conversion model focusing on socialisation (encounter and interaction). Rambo (1993, p.63) argues that the encounter between an advocate and a potential convert initiates a process that for some people results in conversion. He describes how the complex dynamics of such an encounter starts with an advocate targeting an individual using preaching tactics to bring this potential convert into the community.²⁰⁶ One may ask to what extent an individual’s entrance into ISKCON is due to the social interaction and preaching by ISKCON adherents. The interview data shows that twenty-two interviewees claimed to have come in contact with ISKCON because of their participation in varied events, including attending Sunday feast lectures and Hare Krishna festivals, encountering adherents during visits to India, attending a presentation on ancient Indian literature at a university, engaging in a social research project associated with a study of new religious movements. Others came in contact with ISKCON through family members or an unplanned meeting with an ISKCON guru. One interviewee became involved with ISKCON through her participating in the

²⁰⁶ Rambo (1993, p.76) lists four components of missionary strategy: (1) the degree of proselytising, (2) the strategic style, (3) the mode of contact, and (4) the personal benefit a new religious option offers to the potential convert.

campaign to save the Bhaktivedanta Manor (in Watford, Hertfordshire) from closing.²⁰⁷ All these events are, of course, instances of socialisation, and yet what ultimately convinces entrants to convert is often unrelated to their first encounter with adherents. Instead it is the perceived power and effect of ritual practice that triggers the commitment. In the following excerpts, interviewees answer questions about what inspired them most and made them decide to join ISKCON:

The practice of devotional service (chanting, *prasadam* experience, deity worship, *kirtan*, etc.) worked, I immediately understood that. Therefore I took up the process. In addition, the knowledge of the law of karma and the transmigration of the soul were important factors that made me join.²⁰⁸

I joined because of practical experience (70-75%) and intellectual experience (25-30%). However, only the experience may not have been enough. I was looking for answers. I became attracted to the spiritual practice of devotees, the *kirtan* and *prasadam*. All these things attracted me very much. So, it was a combination of the philosophy and the happy experience of the spirituality in practice by devotees.²⁰⁹

Interviewees attach special importance to the practice, but it is essential to understand what attracted them in particular, after having come in contact with ISKCON.

Caroline, explains how, during her first visit to ISKCON Vrindavana in India, she became inspired by attending the morning programme at the temple: “Attending the daily early morning programme (*mangala-arotika*) in front of the deities Sri Sri Radha Syamasundara for four months touched my heart,²¹⁰ and gave me the desire to follow that process with all seriousness”.²¹¹ Similarly, Bartek’s most appealing experience in the early days, after having come in contact with ISKCON, was “listening to the lectures and music and tasting the food prepared by devotees and offered to Krishna

²⁰⁷ Historical background: http://www.bhaktivedantamanor.co.uk/home/?page_id=7; last visited: 23 June 2015.

²⁰⁸ Adam; interviewed on October 30, 2011.

²⁰⁹ Jairo (nationality: Spain; age: 49); interviewed on November 12, 2011.

²¹⁰ All deities in ISKCON temples receive names derived from Krishna narratives mainly found in the *Bhagavata Purana*.

²¹¹ Interviewed on December 4, 2011.

(*prasadam*)”.²¹² This demonstrates that Rambo’s focus on an “advocate” as the centre of the socialisation process is not so straightforwardly applicable in an ISKCON context. However, this does not in the least diminish the role that social interaction with adherents plays in the incorporation of ISKCON entrants.

The following interview excerpts demonstrate that socialisation with ISKCON adherents often encourages seekership:

Before I obtained the association of devotees, I had no real understanding of what was going on. There was just an urge that we should serve God so that we can have a happy life. But I could not understand that I was going to die. I did not realise that from my previous religion. Also, about life after death, it was not concrete. I wasn’t sure. All this became clarified when I came in contact with ISKCON and learned the philosophy from devotees. This gave me the confidence to continue my search.²¹³

Coming in contact with devotees inspired me to become more inquisitive. I understood that suffering is coming from my previous activities. I also understood that Krishna teaches his devotees sometimes through suffering.²¹⁴

After meeting devotees I got a more clear understanding of how karma works and how people can change it by deciding not to act, or to react differently, towards certain proclivities. Thus, I desired to increase my knowledge.²¹⁵

While social interaction generally intensifies seekership, Lofland and Stark’s view that increasing social interaction (developing affective bonds) with adherents goes hand-in-hand with growing alienation from former circles (or neutralisation or absence of “extra-cult attachments”) does not adequately explain the experience of ISKCON entrants. As shown in previous chapters, alienation from former circles is strongly related to following the restrictions associated with the ritual practice.

Lofland and Stark’s “turning point” theory may apply to the ISKCON context if seen

²¹² Interviewed on October 9, 2011.

²¹³ Adam; interviewed on October 30, 2011.

²¹⁴ Benjamin (nationality: United States; age: 53); interviewed on December 17, 2011.

²¹⁵ Sabine (nationality: Germany; age: 29); interviewed on October 22, 2011.

in connection to the quests of individuals to gain clarity about the meaning and underlying beliefs of the rites. This kind of search for meaning often leads to social interaction with adherents. After coming in contact with the chanting and *prasadam*, newcomers want to know how adherents live a life centred on the ritual practice. Hence, socialisation or the development of affective bonds alone does not lead individuals to entering into ISKCON. While socialisation is an important factor, without considering the candidate recruit's complex ways of submitting to the schemes of ritualisation, this explanation remains incomplete. As shown by the stories of Ben, Caroline, Rafael, Tanja and others, separation from former circles often becomes acute when an individual decides to try out, or live, the life of a monk in an ISKCON temple for a certain period of time. If this separation occurs, it is usually *after* a person has decided to enter ISKCON and commit himself or herself to the daily ritual practice and follow the procedure to receive initiation. Ben, for example, after a trial period of three months of experiencing ISKCON temple life, informed his parents of his decision to join the temple in Melbourne at the moment he made the decision to become a monk. His parents strongly opposed his decision, which resulted in a strained relationship for nearly a decade.

Although nearly all interviewees were initiated adherents, only a small number of them ever lived in an ISKCON temple. Joining an ISKCON temple community, if it does occur, happens when a novice enters the transformational stage many months, sometimes years, after his or her first contact with the movement. It is noteworthy that Lofland and Stark's research focused on young people who joined the Reverend Moon's Unification Church in San Francisco within a few weeks. Such a short entry experience can barely be compared with the complexity of the long-term entry process into ISKCON. Looking only at social interaction, without considering an individual's submission to the schemes of ritualisation, can be misleading. Similarly, the absence

of “extra-cult attachments” with non-adherents does not necessarily follow from social interactions with ISKCON adherents. Rather, in an ISKCON context, if novices have difficulties in their relationships with former social circles, then, as previously demonstrated, this is closely connected with their acceptance of ritualisation schemes associated with the sets of oppositions concerning purity and pollution. Moreover, as shown in Chapter Three, the degree of alienation from former environments depends on the extent of difference between ISKCON’s values and practices and the cultural context of the entrant’s former social milieu. ISKCON entrants from a Hindu background generally maintain nearly unchanged family relationships during their entry into ISKCON.

6.1.2.3. Commitment

The growing sense of commitment analysed in Chapter Four demonstrates that entrants into ISKCON dedicate themselves to various levels of commitment. Rambo’s explanation of the commitment stage as an act of surrender adequately describes these levels. Rambo (1993, pp. 124-141) understands commitment to be a painful confrontation, a decision to cross into a new life. Vacillation between two worlds can be painful. Decision making, Rambo maintains, involves the evaluation of alternatives, and the decision to commit oneself frequently goes together with rituals (such as baptism in Christianity). According to Rambo, the commitment process is an act of surrender, turning away from one’s old life and beginning a new one. It is an experience in which the individual undergoes an “internal war between the forces of light and the forces of darkness” (Rambo, 1993, p.134). A more profound surrender, Rambo explains, is a lifelong inner process of submission to God and, for some, to the institution or Church.

The evaluations of alternatives and the “internal war of forces of light and the forces of darkness” are both aspects that often play a role in the preliminary stage preceding the entry process into ISKCON. The following interview excerpts show how certain entrants were vacillating between different worldviews and various alternatives before coming in contact with ISKCON:

I was looking for the absolute truth and therefore also quit my law studies and went to India on my own to search for that truth, which I thought to find in Buddhism. But instead I found Krishna there and the devotees, and when I came back, I wanted to know more about God, so I started to study theology until I understood that my professor was an atheist. That fact upset me so much that I quit my studies completely and went to Vrindavan to study *bhakti-sastri* (a course mainly concerned with the study of *Bhagavad-gita*). After that I joined ISKCON Zurich.²¹⁶

I was practicing different yoga systems: from *hatha* yoga by Iyengar, Kriya Yoga by Yogananda, to Transcendental Meditation by Maharisi and Sai Baba, and Babaji karma-yoga activities. I was also practicing prayers. I experienced a peace of mind and joy of peaceful meditation, but they were temporary and insufficient to satisfy my inquisitiveness. *Bhakti-yoga* gave me the deepest experience of the peace of mind and joy of meditation, and the theology and philosophy of Vaishnavism convinced me that this is a right path to follow.²¹⁷

If an individual goes back and forth between options, this tends to occur before s/he makes the first commitment to chant and to take vows. A clear example of this is Tony’s ongoing questioning for one year before chanting and committing to the vows. The process of submission to the ritual practice and the submersion in the projected schemes starts with a commitment to chant and to follow the vows. This surrender to the practice generally indicates the end of the vacillation stage, if any. Thus the individual becomes fully exposed to the effects of the schemes of ritualisation. Subsequently, entrants undergo a transformational phase that will likely lead the individual to approach an ISKCON guru and to surrender to the initiation procedures

²¹⁶ Caroline; interviewed on December 4, 2011.

²¹⁷ Bartek; interviewed on October 9, 2011.

established by the institution. Such a more profound form of surrender may be seen as on a par with Rambo's understanding of "submission to an institution".

6.1.2.4. Agency of ISKCON Entrants and Extant Conversion Models

A brief journey through the two conversion models selected here reveals the prevalence of three factors of individual agency governing individuals' incorporation into ISKCON. The first factor is seekership, characterized by a growing sense of meaning, which in the beginning concentrates on understanding the meaning of the ritual and later focuses on interpreting the inner experiences ensuing from the ritual practice.

The second factor relates to making multi-level commitments. The first level refers to an individual's dedication to the daily ritual practice, adherence to the prohibitions, and acceptance of the principles of purity and pollution and their underlying principles. A novice enters the second level of commitment when he or she engages in missionary activities. And the third level refers to an individual's decision to follow the instituted procedures to become eligible for initiation. A novice often operates on the second and third level simultaneously, but the second level can also occur after the third. Social interaction, especially when it occurs frequently, accelerates the search for meaning and making commitments. A deeper understanding of the meaning of the ritual practice often causes an individual to commit to the daily ritual practice. In later stages, the need for understanding the ritual experience inspires a novice to approach an ISKCON guru, which then naturally leads to following instituted procedures for initiation.

The third factor has to do with social interaction, which is often intensified by the seekership and the decision to commitment. All three aspects of the entrant's agency are inter-related and indeed, interdependent.

6.2. Inculturation or Drift?

As noted at the outset, Long and Hadden (1983, pp.1-4) claim that a revised conception of socialisation can integrate the divergent assumptions and findings of both the inculturation and social drift models. In contemporary scholarship socialisation is equated with internalisation and social learning, or the process by which new members internalise group norms and values. The inculturation model concentrates on members' efforts to convert outsiders (the agency lies with the insiders) whereas the drift model is concerned with the novice's acquisition of social ideals, or the experience outsiders have when they become converts (the agency lies with the novice).²¹⁸ Inculturation models seem to appeal to those who see cults as a menace, whereas those espousing liberal values favour the social drift model (Long and Hadden, 1983, pp.1-4).

I would argue that to an extent the entry process into ISKCON contains elements of both the inculturation and drift models. Looking at factors supporting the inculturation model, the first element that arises is the strenuous effort of ISKCON to educate its novices, aiming to bring them up to the standard of the group's defined profile of an initiated member. To a certain degree this is a process of submission to the teachings and to the control of ISKCON managers and clergy who direct the lives of individuals to make them instrumental in the fulfilment of ISKCON's

²¹⁸ According to V. Gecas (1981, p.643), there are two main ideas in sociology. The first idea is that "society is a powerful force that directly enters into the socialisation process". The second idea is that the "individual is an active agent within a socialising context". Both ideas, the influence of the group and individual "seekership", are important aspects of this research.

proselytisation strategies. The qualities individuals must possess to become an initiated adherent demonstrate the institution's expectations of candidate initiates. These qualities are concerned with the internalisation of values, the practice of views and philosophy, and the cultivation of knowledge. In ISKCON law, "an ISKCON member in good standing" is a person who demonstrates the expected level of insider knowledge, competence, correct behaviour, and compliance with the etiquettes of discipleship. S/he must follow ISKCON's rules and regulations, practise daily chanting, and serve ISKCON's mission. S/he must also acquire knowledge of the basic principles behind the rites and beliefs, an understanding of the duties of a disciple and a guru, and a good grasp of ISKCON's mood and mission.

ISKCON's prescribed procedure to initiate disciples is an organisational strategy aimed at bringing an individual to the point of internalising knowledge and developing the proselytising spirit required to fulfilling the profile of an initiated ISKCON devotee in "good standing". The examination policy is a recruiting policy that tests an individual's commitment to the teachings and his or her acceptance of Bhaktivedanta as the pre-eminent instructing spiritual master (*siksa-guru*). The Disciple Course stresses the unique position of Bhaktivedanta and the subordinate role of ISKCON gurus to both Bhaktivedanta and ISKCON's mission. It furthermore explains the relationships between serving an ISKCON guru, obeying the authority of the ISKCON Governing Body Commission, and executing ISKCON's mission. These last points are important because there is a need for cooperation between members, gurus and managerial authorities if entrants wish to become exemplary adherents. It is a process of transforming newcomers into ideal group members by using institutional canonical laws and educational systems aimed at making them perfectly capable of delivering the society's goals. As shown in the previous chapter, it is not without significance that interviewees demonstrate blindness and misrecognition of

ISKCON's exertion of power and influence through its institutional and initiation policies.

A second aspect of the inculturation model is related to ISKCON adherents' reduced trust in mainstream society. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, ISKCON adherents understand Bhaktivedanta's criticism on modern society as a presentation of reality. The teachings of Bhaktivedanta train adherents to become critical of the commonly accepted values of modern society. Their belief in the destructiveness of the outside world can be seen as a form of "ideological encapsulation", a closing and rigidifying of the mind-set. Rambo (1993, pp.106-107) understands "ideological encapsulation" to occur when "members and potential converts are both reminded of the purity and sacredness of their beliefs, the destructiveness of the beliefs of the outside world, and often, the special responsibility that adherents bear for preserving the truth." From an insider perspective, ISKCON adherents view aspects of modern society (its entanglements in the material and the sensual), in terms of misidentification of the real (subtle) eternal self with the temporary (gross) mind-body complex. Insiders claim that outsiders are oblivious of the fact that body and mind only function because of the presence of the individual living entity, an eternal spirit soul, the source of consciousness within the material body. The following excerpt demonstrates this insider perspective on outsiders:

The books gave me the knowledge that broadened my views on myself and on the world I live in. Never before had I been able to find so strikingly convincing wisdom that has perfect answers to all my questions. The explanations for human suffering I had heard before joining ISKCON were shallow, inconclusive and insipid. They were good, and still are enough for brainwashed people who identify with their gross material bodies. Modern society based on economic development is the cause of entanglement in the cycle of birth and death, the development of non-godly qualities and the creation of person's "false ego" based on the bodily conception of "I an mine". Exploitive activities are a form of violence towards the soul that prevent the

society's citizens to take up spiritual existence and leave the prison-house of the material worlds to return to the spiritual realm of Goloka Vrindavana.²¹⁹

It is noteworthy that in this view, it is the outsiders who are “brain washed”!

Alongside these aspects indicative of congruence with the ‘inculturation’ model, there are also elements in the ISKCON entry process congruent with the drift model. First, the entry process in ISKCON is a gradual, long-term process strongly in contrast with the old Christian paradigm represented by Paul’s sudden conversion on the road to Damascus. The ‘brainwashing’ model generally relates to an experience that is sudden, dramatic, and emotional and to a certain extent irrational (Richardson, 1985, p.165). The interview data demonstrates that the average time between a person’s first contact with ISKCON and the decision to become an initiated adherent is 2.8 years, which significantly exceeds the minimum one-year waiting time for initiation prescribed by ISKCON canon law. This is in keeping with Rambo (1993, p.102), who recognizes the difference in the length of the entry period from group to group: “Some faiths insist on a very long period of education and socialisation; others focus more on brief, intense periods during which potential converts are encouraged and/or required to make a decision.”

The decision to follow the four regulative principles and chant sixteen rounds of the Hare Krishna mantra, a decision generally taken after one year of unpressured contact and study, represents the core of the resolve to enter ISKCON. This decision appears not to be sudden, irrational or emotional but rather the result of many months of contact with ISKCON’s practice and beliefs. Furthermore, by committing to the ritual practice, individuals naturally comply with the first basic requirements for

²¹⁹ Victor; interviewed on October 30, 2011.

following the institutionally organised process of education and training necessary for receiving initiation.

Second, the interview data show that individuals generally make commitments and identify themselves as seekers if not prior to, then certainly after, initial exposure to ISKCON. This indicates volition, a principle contrary to the inculturation perspective. Individual seekership (Straus, 1976, p.252) and the commitment (Bromley and Shupe, 1979, p.167) to accept the role of an ISKCON adherent stand in contrast with the inculturation model. Both seekership and commitment have been extensively discussed in the previous chapter and in earlier sections dealing with extant conversion models. The interview data shows that individuals entering ISKCON generally engage in an active search for the meaning of life and make commitments on various levels during their journey of entry. For the majority of interviewees, the commitment to adhere to the four regulated principles was a key element that essentially changed their lives and opened the door to following the institutionalised procedures to become eligible for initiation.

For instance, Maryla (38, Poland) shared her conviction that following the four regulative principles is necessary for her inner self-discovery. For Bartek (46, Poland) the most essential change in his life was to stop drinking alcohol, coffee and tea, and to give up smoking. Caroline (38, Switzerland) shared that her decision to follow the regulated principles increased her hankering for something deeper in life, an expression that indicates a desire to create a more “satisfying life”.²²⁰ Whereas following the four regulated principles implies a significant change in their life-styles and orientation for most Westerners entering ISKCON, it was less life-transforming

²²⁰ Straus (1976, p.252) developed the idea that during the conversion process an individual acts within a natural life setting in order to create a “satisfying life”.

for those from a Hindu background. The first concern of the latter was to try to make sense of what their Hindu faith background was, a culture in which these regulated yoga principles are not unfamiliar.

Third, proselytisation is weak and has but limited effect in the ISKCON case. ISKCON mainly focuses on internalisation of beliefs through practice, which implies a “definite organisational” aspect here (Richardson, 1985, p.168). The process of becoming an initiated ISKCON adherent requires organisational structure and support, and the focus is on the internalisation of values, the acceptance of views, the cultivation of knowledge, and the compliance with Vaishnava moral principles and norms of behaviour, all of which are aspects in line with the drift model of conversion.

It is noteworthy that outreach programmes are important preaching tools for ISKCON. Such programmes are organised by local ISKCON adherents. Newcomers become very gradually involved in ISKCON’s activities through regular participation in these programmes. Over the last twenty-five years I have witnessed, organised and participated in many outreach programmes held in Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, Belgium, Ireland, UK and several Balkan states. Both ISKCON householders and single adherents who respect the prohibitions and the daily chanting, see their participation in organising outreach programmes as their contribution to ISKCON’s mission. Apart from a feeling of being connected with the mission, they also derive inspiration from the social interaction with other ISKCON adherents these events generate. Moreover, they feel that such interaction is necessary to keep them inspired in their individual practice. Generally, their involvement in such outreach is voluntary and often develops without any direct involvement of local ISKCON authorities. Once again, we see active agency and choice on the part of adherents, not the use of force or peer pressure to participate in ISKCON’s mission.

A further element indicative of ‘drift’ rather than ‘inculturation’ has to do with the fact that my interview data revealed hardly any instances of serious life crises prior to entry. Crisis situations are usually seen as essential and determining factors in conversion models supporting the inculturation perspective.²²¹ According to Lofland and Stark’s “predisposing conditions”, a crisis intensifies an individual’s search of meaning. Within the ISKCON context the individual’s search for meaning is often initiated by the first contact with the ritual practice and is a helpful process in making successive levels of commitments. To further illustrate this point, I present two excerpts. The first shows a relationship between philosophical conviction and commitment to ritual practice; the second demonstrates a relationship between a search for meaning and engagement in ISKCON’s mission:

The deeper knowledge of it [the philosophy] gave me a very strong argument for committing to the four regulated principles and chanting *japa*.²²²

During fifteen years it gave me a lot of conviction to do something in life for others. So, through ISKCON and Prabhupada’s mission, I found the strength not to remain just on the intellectual platform, but really to perform welfare activities as a servant of the mission.²²³

²²¹ Crisis situations often have been associated with life-transforming experiences leading to sudden conversions (Shinn, 1989, p.122).

²²² Maryla (nationality: Poland; age: 29); interviewed on January 22, 2012.

²²³ Garin (nationality: France; age: 59); interviewed on November 4, 2011.

Chapter Seven: Conclusions

Previous chapters have shown that entering ISKCON is a gradual process governed by strategies of ritualisation. These strategic schemes guide entrants on their journey from neophyte to initiate and from what is considered a mundane life of impurity and ignorance to a life understood to be marked by purity, wisdom, and sacredness. In this concluding chapter I will summarise some of the key finds and arguments in this study, and I will examine afresh the question of whether entry into ISKCON can be understood as a “conversion” process.

7.1. Entry into ISKCON: key stages

My study demonstrates that the process of entering ISKCON is characterized by three key stages. The first stage begins with coming in contact with ISKCON. The first connection with the movement is usually made through the receiving of books/magazines bought from ISKCON book distributors or through the participation in ISKCON-organised events. The first encounter with the daily ritual practice and its underlying beliefs occurs almost always through participation in public Sunday temple services, festivals or local outreach programmes. Reading ISKCON literature and learning the rationale behind the ritual practice, centred on the theories of karma and rebirth, often causes the entrant to reflect on the meaning of his/her temporary human existence. The prospect of an eternal spiritual existence encourages the individual to try out the chanting and to partake in the eating of *prasadam*.

Intense socialisation with ISKCON adherents, the prime characteristic of the second stage, leads the person to commit to the daily practice of chanting and

participation in the *prasadam* rituals. Inspired by the power of the rituals, and believing that they lead to the cleansing of previous karma, s/he goes through a gradual process of change, characterized by separation (from previous social circles), transformation, and increasing internalisation of ISKCON's values. This involves a process of differentiation causing the newcomer to move from outsider status to insider status, by embracing the ritual practice, observing ISKCON's taboos, and complying with its social structure and institutional hierarchy. Incompatibility between ISKCON's way of life and the entrant's former social milieu encourages the individual to refrain from having too much contact with former social groups and networks. This is especially reinforced by the taboos on consuming alcohol and non-vegetarian food. The ritual practice in ISKCON works as a strategy, a functional mechanism promoting social solidarity within ISKCON, and social-cultural alienation from the rest of society. During the transition period, characterized by the entrant's commitment to follow the institutionalised procedure for attaining eligibility for initiation, the entrant accepts the guidance of a guru to train him/her in the gaining of expertise in ritual mastery. The involvement in the ritual practice becomes intensified when adherents share beliefs in, and experiences of, the power of ritual. Entrants gradually internalise a view of reality through concepts such as karma and reincarnation, notions introduced via the ritual practice. They experience an internalisation of beliefs, and the redefinition of cultural dispositions in keeping with the tradition's worldviews.

The making of various commitments and the acceptance of guidance from an ISKCON guru typify the second phase. In this stage entrants make three levels of progressive commitments: (1) a firm dedication to keep up a regulated daily ritual practice, (2) surrender to the mission, and (3) the decision to follow the instituted procedures for becoming an initiated members. ISKCON's policy for attaining

eligibility for initiation requires the approaching of an approved guru for achieving promotion within ISKCON's social hierarchy. The guru, a ritual specialist, assists the novice to appraise/understand his/her ritual experience in terms of present and future developments. Having assimilated and accepted ISKCON's social cultural traditional worldviews, the entrant attempt to strictly follow all the rules with regard the principles of purity and pollutions and fully submits to the schemes of ritualisation. The culmination of the second stage is the actual rite of initiation – this formally transforms the individual from a relative outsider to a confirmed insider. Following this, the individual continues on a journey of ever-increasing incorporation into ISKCON values and practices. Some individuals carry on to attain high levels of ritual mastery, gaining initiation into priesthood as Brahmins, and in a few cases, initiates carry on their ritual practice over many years, till they reach the highest stage, that of renunciation, and are admitted into the highest rungs of the ISKCON hierarchy as sannyasis.

This journey is a protracted one, and depends to a very large extent on the agency of the individual. Absorption in the schemes of ritualisation within ISKCON leads adherents to exhibit various forms of blindness, which usually manifest in three forms: (1) a denial of the source of arbitrariness of the schemes; (2) a failure to see themselves as projecting these ritualisation schemes; and (3) an inability to explain the process by which the ritual practice produces results. These forms of misrecognition are signs of progressive incorporation in ISKCON. The third stage culminates in the individual's attainment of eligibility to undergo the initiation rite in Brahminhood.

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
SEPARATION	TRANSFORMATION	INCORPORATION
Participation in ISKCON events and temple services;	Commitment to ritual mastery in order to become an initiate;	Further engagement with ritual observance and practice; Refining ritual

<p>Gradual withdrawal from former social circles;</p> <p>Socialisation with ISKCON members;</p> <p>Participation in ritual; Observing of ISKCON's regulations; Growing search for the meaning behind the rituals</p>	<p>Continued observance of taboos; Cultivating attachment to an ISKCON guru</p> <p>Increasing socialisation;</p> <p>Engagement with training courses; Engagement with ISKCON's mission;</p> <p>➔ The undergoing of the rite of initiation (<i>harinama diksha</i>)</p> <p>Change of status from novice to initiate; adoption of a new name</p>	<p>expertise.</p> <p>Deeper levels of understanding of ISKCON's theology;</p> <p>Deepening bonds with fellow-members; Continued engagement with the mission;</p> <p>In some cases: Further initiations into brahminhood/ <i>sannyasa</i>; Accepting leadership positions.</p>
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7.2. Entry into ISKCON and Conversion

The interview data demonstrate that nearly all ISKCON adherents look at their previous lives as “misguided”. This points to a *complete conversion*, a state characterized by the rejection of norms that were prevalent in the convert’s previous environment. Because ISKCON adherents increasingly trust ISKCON’s scriptural tradition and because their absorption in the schemes of ritualisation and the strategies of differentiation deepens, they see their previous environment as “misdirected” and themselves as having lived “in a state of ignorance”. They perceive the outside world as ignorant of the identity of the eternal conscious living self, encaged in a perishable material body. This is in line with Gooren’s (2010, p.231) view that “the convert’s former understanding of the self, past events, etc., is now regarded as a misunderstanding”. As demonstrated in previous chapters, the submission of ISKCON

entrants to ritualisation schemes goes hand in hand with a redefinition of reality and an internalisation of values conventional for those following the Chaitanya tradition. Through the daily ritual practice, enabled by intense socialisation with ISKCON adherents, entrants become transformed persons. While the transformational process strongly indicates conversion, to classify it as such requires some caveats.

The foremost characteristic of entering ISKCON that emerges from the summary is that this entry is a gradual process and involves various stages of incorporation. It is an ongoing, gradual process of transformation, a process very different from Paul's experience on the road of Damascus. Thus, entry into ISKCON is incongruous with conversion in the traditional Christian model which refers to a sudden radical change. Moreover, in keeping with Robinson and Sathianathan (2003, pp.1-18), my work suggests that the Christian model is an extreme option and only one possibility. Conversion does not necessarily mean exclusive adherence to a set of dogmas, or abandonment of all other beliefs. Reidhead and Reidhead's (2003, pp.183-187) view that conversion is a redefining of one's life in terms of "constant conversion" is a statement reflecting the reality of the maturation process typical for entry into ISKCON.

Entry into ISKCON most closely relates to Long's (1983, p.1-2) and Hadden's social drift model, which, they claim, "suggests that people become converts gradually, even inadvertently, through the influence of social relationships". The term "drifting" closely relates to the process of internalisation by which ISKCON entrants' perception of their environment gradually changes. However, that would not exclude the use of the term "conversion", provided that the concept includes the idea of a gradual process, which may relate to either drifting or a gradual change of perspective.

The change of worldview often becomes a reality when ISKCON entrants have changed their views on their previous beliefs.

This brings us to the second element. The analysis of the entry process, in particular the stages involving the internalisation of values and the submission to strategies of ritualisation, has shown that there remains a connection with previous culture or beliefs. The change of (world-)view is complete when an individual views, understands, and accepts his or her former religion through the principles of Chaitanya Vaishnavism. Rather than a complete break with previous beliefs, entering ISKCON generally involves a process of reinterpreting those beliefs.

Thus, conversion here is not a radical break. The Christian-centred model has prevailed in scholarly literature on conversion for a very long time and has produced an understanding of the term that may not fully reflect what happens when individuals embrace new belief systems. That understanding suggests a complete breaking away from all the elements of an old faith and a full surrender to the principles of a new one. Many studies have shown, however, that conversion involves a process of identity construction and an internalisation of values and that it includes elements of agency, such as seekership, motivation, and commitment. Moreover, my study shows that the break between the *before* and the *after* is not radical but entails processes of liminality, transformation, re-formation of worldview, integration of values, and incorporation. These processes often lead to an amalgamation of elements of both the old and the new faith, thus enabling one to experience one's old faith through the theological and philosophical principles of the new one. The acceptance of a new faith and its practice does not end with affiliation to a certain group. Conversion generally involves a process evolving through stages of incorporation and passing through successive levels of agency and social and hierarchical integration.

The results of my work thus do not suggest a rejection of the term “conversion” but rather propose a rethinking of the concept. Whereas the general idea of conversion as a change indicating that “the old was wrong and the new is right” is applicable to individuals entering ISKCON, it must have at least two additional features. First, conversion is a gradual “long-term” process, not a radical and sudden change; and second, conversion is not a radical break, that is to say, a connection with the previous religion or culture may remain.

“Conversion” remains a useful term, firstly, because it indicates a sense of “before” and “after”. Hence, within an ISKCON context the position “after” is not the result of replacing one worldview for another. Rather, it is the product of an intricate incorporation process that leads entrants to reject norms prevalent in their previous environment. Secondly, the term “conversion” also stands for a transformation. There is a sense of progression from the status of an “outsider” to the position of an “insider”, a progression often involving the internalisation of values and a change of identity, behaviour, and lifestyle. Such elements typify aspects of ISKCON’s entry process.

To include cases like ISKCON, the term “conversion” must be used in a broader sense. Such a broader concept of conversion must include a reinterpretation of reality, in particular a reinterpretation of reality that results from the internalising of principles and values associated with newly accepted theological views. Furthermore, the concept of conversion needs to consider the social effects of ritualisation and the role of the ritual specialist on agency. These aspects of the ritualisation process are discussed in the following section in the framework of ritualisation theory.

7.3. Entry Processes within the Framework of Ritualisation Theory

My work has drawn significantly on the theory of ritualisation put forward by Bell, which, in my view, provides a particularly elegant way of thinking about ritual and its effects on “conversion” processes. Her framework for studying ritualisation strategies, when applied to the conversion process in ISKCON, enables us to explore a whole new dimension of conversion. By applying her theoretical framework, this study has shed new light on how ritual and ritualisation processes in ISKCON enable neophytes to internalise ISKCON’s meanings and values and how the same processes facilitate those neophytes’ deeper incorporation into ISKCON.

In summary, Bell (1992, p.7) views ritualisation as a “particular cultural strategy of differentiation”. Ritualisation employs schemes and strategies that distinguish ritual action from ordinary activity. My own 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 (to the extent that conversion models consider ritual action as an important element at all) focuses mainly on the first category, which Van Gennep (1960, p.10) classifies as “rites of passage”. In Christianity, baptism, marriage, and funerals are typical “rites of passage”. They are seen as milestones of life and represent a transition into a newly envisioned future and, subsequently, a separation from the past. Parallel to these types of rituals are rites known in Hindu traditions as *samskaras*. These are sacraments playing important roles throughout the life of a Hindu (Zaehner, 1973, p.153-154). Some examples of *samskaras* are: *nama-karana* (the name-giving ceremony), *vivaha* (marriage ceremony), *annaprashana* (ceremony of giving a child its first solid food). Extant conversion models, when they do consider ritual, focus on these types of rite,

particularly when they entail initiation into a new order or membership of a new organisation, which often entails assuming a new name, new forms of clothing, and a new lifestyle. 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. Enacted on a daily basis, they pervade the entire existence of the performer. Contrary to the limited role of sacraments in Christian and Hindu traditions, the daily ritual practice performed in ISKCON plays a crucial role in directing the entry process. Proficiency in ritual mastery forms the basis for social promotion, internalisation of values, development of worldview, separation from former social environment, and incorporation into the ISKCON milieu. The daily ritual practice determines agency, which involves making commitments, and engagement on successive levels of search for meaning. Extant conversion models, insofar as they consider rituals to be merely milestones in a life journey, are often blind to the critical role of daily rites as practised by groups like ISKCON.

Ritualisation, Bell (1992, p.197) holds, is a strategy for the construction of power relationships. Her study has shown that ritual action, empowered by schemes of ritualisation, is able to control relationships, rhetoric, and social roles, and that ritual practice guides agency through the creation of boundaries in which search for meaning, commitments, and social interaction evolve; and they all play a crucial role in entry processes of organisations that, like ISKCON, have ritual practice at their core.

My study of “conversion” to ISKCON demonstrates that the power of ritualisation works through four dimensions: (1) the effects of ritual practice on socialisation and vice versa; (2) the role of ritual specialists; (3) the forms of misrecognition and blindness resulting from ritual practice; and (4) 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, p.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 an entrant’s previous sociocultural environment determines his or her relationship with that environment. Simultaneously, ritual experiences shared among group members may 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. In addition, socialisation is crucial for learning correct practice and gaining expertise in ritual performance. It is also important to analyse the extent to which intense socialisation facilitates the learning and acceptance of the ritual practice.

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.

In studying ritual power in the context of conversion, a first step would be to look at what distinguishes ritual specialists from neophytes. Furthermore, one needs to investigate the relationship between the expert and the novice, and the influence of that relationship on incorporation into the organisation. 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 third 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. Methods to ascertain forms of blindness or misrecognition require the identification of schemes and strategies of ritualisation (see Chapter Five).

Ritualisation is often a way of transforming individuals into ritualised persons who in turn begin to deploy the prevailing schemes of ritualisation themselves. On the part of these individuals, this entails a form of blindness to and misrecognition of the organisation’s power structures and its deployment of schemes of ritualisation that are capable of moulding individuals’ perceptions of reality. This blindness enables them

to accept the organisation's world and become further incorporated and controlled by its structures and boundaries.

The fourth 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, as demonstrated earlier, 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.

This framework of analysis 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. 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.

7.4. Scope for Further Study

As demonstrated by this thesis, individuals entering ISKCON pass through a series of stages. They are guided by ritual specialists and undergo a process of internalisation of values by realising the effects of their everyday ritual practice. In addition, entrants reinterpret reality through their absorption in strategies of ritualisation and demonstrate in the process what Bell describes as forms of blindness or misrecognition. It is important to note, however, that such experiences are not exclusive to ISKCON. In fact there are many organisations whose members observe forms of daily ritual practice that influence the entry and incorporation process (or conversion) of entrants in almost identical ways.

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. An

example is the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement inaugurated in 1958 by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi as the Spiritual Regeneration Movement.²²⁴ Lola Williamson (2010, p.87) describes TM as a form of meditation:

TM is a simple form of meditation based on repeating a mantra silently. Maharishi taught that the meditator should be gentle and should not concentrate, which he said would cause strain and interrupt the natural process of transcending thought. The mediator should first become aware that thoughts come and go naturally in the mind. The mantra is then repeated in the same way that other thoughts are – with gentle effortlessness. When the meditator realizes that he or she has drifted away from thinking the mantra, one simply begins to think it again.

The TM-Sidhi technique is supposedly based on Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, a foundational text on yoga (ca. 100 BCE-500 CE), one of the six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy (Williamson, 2010, p.95). To a certain extent, the mantra meditation technique parallels the daily chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra (*japa*).

Another example of ritual practice comparable to the daily chanting of ISKCON members is the chanting of Soka Gakkai adherents. The Soka Gakkai is a branch of Nichiren Buddhism (Japan) with a significant international outreach.²²⁵ While most Buddhist groups practice forms of mediation, Soka Gakkai Buddhists repeatedly chant *nam-myoho-renge-kyo* on beads, a chant in praise of the *Lotus Sutra*, a set of verses they recite daily.²²⁶ They believe that such chanting produces unity with nature, wealth, and personal happiness (Coleman, 2013, pp.91-99). There are also the Sahaja Yoga rituals, a series of daily rites aimed at purification, the

²²⁴ Another example of a Hindu-inspired meditation movement involving a steady daily ritual practice is the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF), a movement based on Paramahansa Yogananda's teachings of Kriya Yoga, a system of meditation techniques requiring an action or rite (*kriya*) (Williamson, 2010, pp. 55-79).

²²⁵ Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism derives from Nichiren Daishonin, a Japanese Buddhist teacher/reformer (circa 1200 CE) (Hurst, 1994, p.219).

²²⁶ Soka Gakai Buddhists repeatedly chant *nam-myoho-renge-kyo* and recite *gonyo* prayers. For an introduction to the movement and the practice of the chanting visit: www.sgi.org and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hW-liLGL8i0> Last visited: 23 June 2015.

banishment of negativity, protection, and devotional worship (Coney, 1999, pp.67-92). Members of groups performing such daily ritual practices often develop ritual expertise with the help of senior ritual specialists.

In such groups senior ritual specialists guide neophytes by teaching them how to practice correctly and how to interpret the effects of daily ritual performance. Judith Coney (1999, p.62) gives the following account of how ritual experience is explained to individuals entering into Sahaja Yoga.²²⁷

The transformation of the individual becomes manifest through social interchange and *in association*. It begins from the first contact a newcomer has with Sahaja Yoga, and especially through “realization”. The experience of the “realization” plies the newcomer with a plethora of information which is made sense in a social context... it gives to individuals information about “what to feel” and “how to interpret the feeling”... This information enables the newcomer to begin to have an understanding of what “being a Sahaja Yogi” entails.

An elite group of ritual specialists exercises power and control over individuals by assigning conditions of ritual proficiency to entry procedures. Within the Sahaja Yoga movement leaders control the incorporation and subsequent promotion of newcomers by introducing them only gradually to different echelons of rituals. The timing of their introduction is based on their assumed readiness to progress to the next level. There are three stages of ritual activity in Sahaja Yoga: (1) daily meditation, (2) daily purification rituals meant for protection and banishment of negative forces, and (3) an introduction to devotional worship (Coney, 1999, pp. 70-71).

²²⁷ Coney (1999, p.7) investigates Westerners’ entry into and socialisation within the Sahaja Yoga movement. She observes that although members create a common sense of identity, they develop personal viewpoints on the movement and its meaning.

Members of groups engaging in everyday ritual performance guided by ritual experts usually go through a process of internalising of values and absorbing strategies of ritualisation and their effects in ways similar to ISKCON entrants. As demonstrated by my work, ritualisation is often a dynamic and crucial force that facilitates internalisation. The following excerpt shows how newcomers in the Sahaja Yoga movement internalise values by *realising* the effects of their daily performance:

The power of Sahaja Yoga ritual is confirmed by the vibrations that are felt by followers as a result of its performance. Rites induce experience, in this case triggering altered somatic, emotional and cognitive states (Coney, 1999, p.67).

Through the process of *realisation*, many understandings of *Sahaja Yoga* are introduced to newcomers at a deep level. These, if they resonate with the expectations and prior experiences of newcomers, facilitate the production of new definitions in them, beginning their transformation into recognised and recognisable members of the group (Ibid, p.65).

There are many other organisations whose members absorb themselves in regular performance of rites, such as 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 (Reader, 2005, pp.93-96). The influence of daily ritual practice on the internalisation of norms, values, and the creation of cultural and theological/philosophical dispositions facilitates the construction of ritualisation strategies. Everyday ritual practice often leads to absorbing these strategies, a practice that supports a dynamic process of reinterpreting reality which involves forms of blindness or misrecognition. I. Reader's (2005, p.90) experience is an example of this. In 1981-2, Reader spent some time in Japan in a Zen Buddhist temple in Sendai. He arose daily at 4:00 am, went to the main hall of the temple for an hour and a half of meditation, followed by a long period of *samu*, that is, sweeping up autumnal leaves

from the temple grounds and the graveyard. Reader describes his experiences as follows:

We were to clean the garden and sweep the leaves during the period, which normally lasted for around forty-five minutes. In actuality we went through a rather theatrical performance of work that was as much concerned with its avoidance as with its enactment. Those with brooms found it easy to go through the motions; I, broomless, had a more uncomfortable time and was confronted with a situation that perhaps was more akin to a Zen *koan* (enigmatic questions) than anything else. How does one sweep up the leaves without a broom when there are no leaves to sweep? I was, however, *the only one who appeared to question the logic of operation of clearing that which was already in a state of considerable order*. As a result I came to reflect that *samu* was not simply a functional procedure... Cleaning and sweeping the garden was a ritual performance and hence its importance need not primarily, or at all, be with external actions involved but with the inner meanings they symbolized.

Reader's experience demonstrates that for the Zen practitioners of the Japanese Sandai Buddhist temple *samu* involves a particular perception or understanding of reality, enabled through the internalisation of the schemes of ritualisation central to this organisation.

Forms of blindness associated with performing everyday rituals, as shown in the following account of a follower of Maharishi, a daily practitioner of TM meditation rituals, often entail accepting a particular philosophy as true or acceptable, without overtly questioning or challenging it:

“... I dutifully told people in introductory lectures that TM was indeed scientific, not religious. I didn't feel as though I was lying, because it just seemed to me a matter of semantics... I wonder why it didn't bother me more that I was lying” (Williamson, 2010, p.88).

In Sahaja Yoga circles, adherents are told the following story as an explanation for the universal reality of the realisation of Sahaja Yoga rites (an understanding which adherents present as factual):

There is a story in Sahaja Yoga of a man, living in the middle of an African desert, who was initiated by a travelling Sahaja Yogi. The travelling Yogi then continued on his way. Months later, however, he thought of this man alone in the desert and decided to write him. To his surprise, the man replied and described “Sahaja Yoga-like” experiences and insights, about both the guru and himself, gained solely through meditation and not through any contact with other members of the religion (Coney, 1999, p.7).

This story is told to newcomers to convince them that Sahaja Yoga initiates can realise perfection through self-discovery. This helps newcomers to acquire the required dispositions to become receptive to the practice.

These examples demonstrate that the daily ritual practice of ISKCON adherents is not unique and that there are many organisations in which followers engage in extensive practice of daily rites involving the guidance of ritual specialists. The experience of forms of blindness and misrecognition as a result of everyday ritual practice and the execution of power and control through ritualisation is not uncommon in groups rooted in ritual.

All of this demonstrates that there certainly is scope to apply the ritual-centred framework developed here to analyse the entry/conversion processes into groups which place a high value on daily ritual practice. Furthermore there is potential, based on multiple case studies, to develop a conversion model for organisations in which daily ritual practice is a prevalent factor. The method could include: (1) identifying the effect of rituals on forms and modes of socialisation, (2) discerning elements of agency, (3) ascertaining schemes of ritualisation, (4) exploring the role of ritual specialists, and (5) identifying associated forms of misrecognition and blindness. Such studies could examine the possibility of combining theories.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: The Interview Schedule Used in this Study

General Interview Guide

Personal information: name, age, gender, year of joining ISKCON, *asrama*, nationality, religious background, religious conviction of the parents, ethnic origin, present and previous country of residence;

What is your educational level?

Comprehensive (16-18 years):

University (BA):

Postgraduate study (MA):

PhD:

Other educational qualifications:

List of questions discussed in the interviews:

Section 1:

- a. Did you join ISKCON because of practical experiences or because of intellectual considerations, or both? Briefly describe these experiences or considerations.
- b. How much time was there between your first contact(s) with ISKCON and the moment you decided to join the movement?
- c. Describe the major changes in your views, attitudes, and your perception of your own personality during this period.
- d. What were the most essential changes in your life during that time?

- e. How did these changes affect your relationship with the social environment and community you were part of or related to *before* coming in contact with ISKCON?
- f. Which Western cultural norms of behaviour did you reject or accept during that time?
- g. Which aspects of ISKCON's philosophy attracted you the most?
- h. What religious experience in ISKCON did you find the most appealing in that period?

Section 2:

- a. Do you think ISKCON's GaudiyaVaishnava philosophy and practice are universally applicable, that is, applicable for all humans at all times?
- b. Do you apply ISKCON's GaudiyaVaishnava principles in all spheres of your life?
- c. Do you consider ISKCON's GaudiyaVaishnava philosophy and practice to be the highest knowledge and achievement available to humanity?
- d. Do you accept the teachings of Sri Chaitanya fully? Is your commitment to the religious principles of ISKCON's GaudiyaVaishnavism firm, or do you consider some aspects in your practice and belief negotiable or pliable?
- e. What do you consider central life questions since you joined ISKCON?
- f. How do these central questions induce you to think about and relate to your fellow humans?

Section 3:

- a. Which former practices and beliefs, religious and non-religious, did you reject in the process of joining ISKCON?
- b. Which former aspects of belief did you abandon, and why?

- c. Which life questions that were very important to you *before* joining ISKCON have now become less important?
- d. Which questions became important to you *after* coming in contact with ISKCON?
- e. Are there certain topics you prefer not to discuss anymore or from which you distance yourself since you have joined ISKCON?

Section 4:

- a. Did you answer to an inner need by joining ISKCON? Please explain.
- b. Did you initially become attracted to ISKCON because you had developed a positive relationship with one or more ISKCON members?
- c. Have there been certain events that inspired you to join ISKCON? Please explain.
- d. To what extent has your acquaintance with the law of karma and transmigration of the soul through the cycle of birth and death influenced your decision to commit yourself to the regulative principles of *bhakti-yoga* and *nama-japa* (chanting of the holy names of Krishna)?
- e. How much does your religious faith depend on the acceptance of the existence of the soul, its transmigration, and the law of karma?
- f. How do you perceive practitioners of other religions who do not accept the teachings of reincarnation and the law of karma?
- g. When you started practicing the religious principles and rituals of ISKCON and the GaudiyaVaishnava tradition did you experience any resistance from family members, colleagues, or friends? If yes, please clarify what kind of critique or resistance you encountered. Did you suffer on account of this? To what extent was your decision to join ISKCON influenced by this experience?

Section 5:

- a. Would you describe your life as one of suffering
 - before joining ISKCON?
 - after joining ISKCON?
- b. How did you explain personal suffering prior to joining ISKCON?
- c. Did your views on suffering change after you joined ISKCON? If yes, why? Was this based on philosophical grounds or on personal experience?
- d. How do your present views on suffering compare/contrast with those you held prior to joining ISKCON?
- e. Which of the following views on suffering were known to you before coming in contact with ISKCON? Were these views related to your previous sociocultural environment or religious conviction? Please explain.
 - i) The cause of suffering is ignorance of the real self, or the spirit soul,
 - ii) Suffering is a consequence of past sins.
 - iii) Severe suffering is a sign of God's mercy and brings one closer to God.
 - iv) Suffering helps fixing the mind on the Absolute Truth and transcending material existence.
 - v) Suffering is a form of correction or education.
- f. Do you accept or reject these former views on suffering?

If "yes", do you see them now in a different framework of values (such as the existence of a spirit soul, the laws of karma, etc.)?

If "no", do you see these former views on suffering as a necessary phase on your religious path?
- g. Are your practical dealings with suffering—in the light of the belief in the existence of a spirit soul and the law of karma—now different than before you came in contact with ISKCON?

Interview Consent Form

[DRAFT]

This consent form outlines my rights as a participant in the research project conducted by Luc de Backer, School of Theology, Religious Studies, and Islamic Studies, University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

I understand that

1. Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary.
2. It is my right to decline to answer any question I am asked.
3. I am free to end the interview at any time.
4. I may request that the interview not be taped.
5. The data gathered in this interview is confidential with respect to my name and personal identity unless I specify otherwise.
6. My name and personal identity will not appear in any tape or transcript unless I specify otherwise.

I HAVE READ THIS CONSENT FORM. I HAVE HAD A CHANCE TO ASK QUESTIONS CONCERNING ANY AREAS I DID NOT UNDERSTAND.

Please tick one of the two options below:

- I allow my name and identity to be revealed in any publication.
- I allow my name and identity to appear on any tape or in any transcript.

Appendix 2: Overview of Conducted Interviews

	Month	Initials	Nationality	Previous Religion	Age
1	October 2011	Bvg	Poland	Roman Catholic	46
2	October 2011	Pd	The Netherlands	Protestant	54
3	October 2011	Ab	England	Church of England	59
4	October 2011	Gau	South Africa	Hindu	40
5	October 2011	Vrd	Croatia	Roman Catholic	46
6	October 2011	Vmg	India	Hindu Vaisnava/Saiva	43
7	October 2011	Sd	Germany	No religion	29
8	October 2011	Dds	Croatia	Roman Catholic	35
9	November 2011	Tv	Finland	Protestant	49
10	November 2011	Ys	Spain	Roman Catholic	48
11	November 2011	Jb	Canada	Roman Catholic	58
12	November 2011	Rs	The Netherlands	Protestant	36
13	November 2011	Ad	Belgium	Roman Catholic	58
14	November	Kv	Ukraine	No Religion	37

	2011				
15	November	Gs	France	Roman Catholic	59
	2011				
16	November	Mah	Argentina	Roman Catholic	36
	2011				
17	December	Ld	Belgium	Roman Catholic	51
	2011				
18	December	Bb	USA	No religion	53
	2011				
19	December	Dd	Switzerland	Protestant	38
	2011				
20	January 2012	Rd	France	Christian	59
21	January 2012	Lak	Czech Republic	Christian	34
22	January 2012	Mv	Poland	Roman Catholic	29
23	January 2012	Pdy	England	Hindu	42
24	January 2012	Nim	England	Hindu	34
25	March 2012	Nar	England	Hindu	50
26	March 2012	Rm	The Netherlands	Dutch Reformed Church	68
27	March 2012	Kli	Hungary	No religion	41
28	April 2012	Tul	Germany	Roman Catholic	33
29	April 2012	Cri	Germany	Roman Catholic	28
30	April 2012	Kar	England	Roman Catholic	53

31	May 2012	Jos	Germany	Roman Catholic	49
32	May 2012	Mad	France	No religion	52
33	May 2012	Syl	France	Calvinist	63
34	May 2012	Pri	England	Hindu	28
35	May 2012	Basra	Australia	Anglican Church	62
36	May 2012	Rad	Czech Republic	No religion	30
37	June 2012	Syam	England	Hindu	29
38	June 2012	Gad	France	Roman Catholic	54
39	June 2012	Nik	Ukraine	Christian/ISKCON	25
40	June 2012	Tri	Czech Republic	Roman Catholic	52

Appendix 3: Topical Analysis of the Interview Schedule

The first section of the interview schedule inquires about the process of entry into ISKCON. It concerns the time period between the point of coming in contact with ISKCON and the point when the individual decides to join the movement. It examines what it was that initially attracted newcomers to ISKCON. In addition it evaluates the importance of, reasoning and processes of socialisation. The majority of the questions of the first section explore the significance of individual reasoning, as well as of socialisation into ISKCON's beliefs, values and practices as factors leading the individual to enter ISKCON.

Section two of the interview schedule examines the interviewees' change of worldview. Using J. Griffiths' methods for measuring the properties of what he assumes to be a "religious account", this section explores interviewees' engagement with, and acceptance of, ISKCON's religious framework.

The third section of the interview schedule is mainly concerned with the question of rejection of previous practices and beliefs and the acceptance of new ones. The answers give insights into the extent to which the individual's entry into ISKCON is concerned both with a change of belief and with shifts in practice.

The fourth set of questions inquires about the entrants' social interactions before and after their entry into ISKCON. It also inquires about the reactions of friends and family to the individual's participation in ISKCON, and the entrant's relationships with them. This section also examines the role of reason and philosophy in the entry process, and the importance of certain critical events that occur during this period of initial exposure to and increasing familiarity with ISKCON.

The fifth part explores changes in the interviewees' views on suffering. The answers to the questions here enable an exploration of the extent to which the person may have adopted the newly acquired (ISKCON) philosophical framework in relation to suffering and abandoned previously held views on suffering.