Spiritual Conversion and Dietary Change
Empirical Investigations in Two Eco-spiritual Communities

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Spiritual Conversion and Dietary Change: Empirical Investigations in Two Eco-spiritual Communities

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Abstract: Literature is silent about the stability of change occurring through spiritual conversions. The researcher proposes that the dietary change in eco-spiritual communities is more long-lasting than where spirituality is absent. Conversion research has long established that spiritual conversions result in a radical change of conduct. However, little if anything is said about the durability of change thus taking place. Through decades of participation in meat-free communities, the researcher observed that maintaining a sustainable diet is a steadier project for spiritual converts than for nonspiritual consumers. Not to immediately test this supposition quantitatively, but first to gain qualitative insights and construct meaning together with adherents, the researcher visited three spiritual eco-farms in the Hare Krishna (UK and Eastern Europe) and the Seventh-day Adventist (East Africa) movements. The samples were chosen because of their embraced vegetarianism and its widespread practice and promotion within and outside their ranks. The researcher spent several months on these farms, volunteered in their daily projects, made observations, and conducted twenty-nine interviews. The researcher found that the rich conversion narratives gained in both communities serve as additional triggers for sustainability, an option not available for nonspiritual dieters. The researcher proposes that the serendipitous, spontaneous, and miraculous elements of these conversion accounts, and their regular repetition, in particular, bolster the dietary practices of members and their respective communities. Further research is needed to test this hypothesis quantitatively.

Keywords: Dietary Change, Vegetarian, Spirituality, Spiritual Communities, Krishna, Adventist

Introduction

In the first part of this article, the researcher will give a summary of how metanoia (the Greek word for conversion) is seen in the relevant psycho-sociologic literature as a phenomenon resulting in radical behaviour change. Following that, the researcher will introduce research carried out in spiritual communities promoting pro-environmental values, especially where their dietary practice is concerned. For the sake of simplicity and for the purposes of this article, the researcher calls these communities eco-spiritual.

The aim of the investigation was to gain better understanding of the lived dietary experiences of adherents through qualitative methods. The researcher was interested to learn about the grips that help adherents to switch to and maintain a meat-free diet. The theme of metaphysical conversion emerged during the research and received prominence after data collection. Interview questions were not pre-set to expect conversion stories, and did not aim at teasing out supernatural, miraculous accounts. Interestingly, the word conversion was never used by either party in the interviews. Stories were not channeled into a conversional grammar.

The Hare Krishna and the Seventh-day Adventist groups have different reasons for following and representing a plant-based or vegetarian diet. Despite a general global decline in institutional religiosity (Pew Research Forum 2012), both organisations are reported to be increasing in membership (Seventh-Day Adventist Church 2016), though in the Krishna case, there is no official record to support the claim. The inter-religious dialogue formulated through this research project has raised several interesting questions, such as what makes the groups follow certain dietary practices and not others. Also, analyzing the wider cultural aspects of these two alternative diets in accordance with the semiotic way in which anthropologist Mary Douglas

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(1972) “deciphered” the Jewish meal, could provide further insights into the communities as well as their dietary choice. Indeed, her concept of regarding diet as a code, where the key to decoding lies in very specific cultural aspects, proves to be very useful in deciphering the spiritual meal. However, in this article, the researcher will exclusively focus on conversion accounts as one possible trigger for sustainability in and through eco-spiritual communities. Other important factors, deriving from the teachings (orthodoxies) and set of practices (orthopraxis) of the groups, will not be discussed here.

**Spiritual Conversions**

Conventional consumer ethics are challenged by scientific centres globally, in some cases putting forward ethical consumption as a supra-moral alternative. The term supra-moral refers to an attitude that goes beyond the limits of what is traditionally and conventionally expected, imposed, or recognised by society (Kupperman 1999). Drawing upon Latour’s (2005) proposal about asking religious people why they do what they do and his concept about plug-ins (Latour 2005), which allow actors to make competent consumer choices, Wenell (2016) suggests that supra-moral alternatives of consumption may be more readily attainable to adherents of religion. These plug-ins, among other options, can be embedded spiritual teachings that have resonance with followers, resulting in supra-moral and pro-environmental behaviour. Plug-ins serve as enabling skills for making consumer choices, and they result from prior learning or experience. For instance, the Hare Krishna believers will not consume animal flesh as a direct consequence of their ethical and spiritual standpoint on the issue. Because of the broad versatility of plug-ins to draw upon, religious practitioners may be special targets for research when consumer ethics is the object of inquiry. The author draws attention to some of these plug-in effects, one of which is the spiritual teachings of Christianity or Buddhism. As far as Christianity is concerned, the significance of the “Good Samaritan,” as a practical example, is emphasised. In that parable, a Samaritan, culturally regarded as an enemy to the Jews, is stirred to treat a sick Jew lying on the roadside, thus disregarding the law of defilement (not to touch a potentially dead body). In other words, mainstream cultural norms are overridden by the spiritual conviction dictated from within. This supra-moral act is put forward as a vivid example to present the counter-culturalism or counter-traditionalism of ethical consumption.

Corresponding to the above, the question is raised if metanoia, the Greek equivalent for conversion, may also serve as an additional “ingredient,” or plug-in, for sustainability. If yes, might this ingredient intensify and solidify the inscription and embedding of new lifestyle practices? Metanoia means a change of one’s mind, a new way of thinking. In the Judeo-Christian heritage, the psalmist recalls: “Mine ears hast thou opened” (Psalm 40), and this opening up to a new aspect took place in the Apostle Paul’s life on his way to Damascus. His ears were opened through a seasonal blinding of the eye, coupled by other miraculous manifestations—an experience altogether new and emotional for the renowned philosopher and Pharisee, who was at the time zealously engaged in assisting in the killing of Christ’s followers. Suddenly, within a few days, a few hours, the persecutor and killer became a despised and persecuted apostate to the Jews and an apostle to the Christians and Gentiles. This is but one of the conversion narratives found in the Judeo-Christian lineage. Both the New and Old Testament Scriptures are replete with such stories about people finding new meanings to life through occasionally sudden, but many times gradual, conversions from previous life-paths (e.g., the story of Nebuchadnezzar, King Manasseh, Lydia, Cornelius’ household, etc.). What often finds repetition in these accounts is the miraculous, unexpected elements that could hardly be explained rationally. The process, often accompanied by an intense state of spiritual emotions, leads to unexpected utterances of behaviour.

Reminiscent to Judeo-Christian accounts, conversion stories are recorded in other religious scripts as well as personal narratives (Rambo 1993). Revelations, visions, and guidance are given to Mohammed, Buddha, Krishna, and other representatives of the world religions. As a more
contemporary example, the Japanese Journal of Religious Studies published an article on conversion stories experienced and popularised in Japan’s new religious movements (Shimazono 1986). Common to all these are the radical change of mindset, occurring at or stemming from a specific moment in time, followed and manifested by an altogether new way of conduct. In Kierkegaard’s (1985, 18) words: “And now, the moment. A moment such as this is unique. To be sure, it is short and temporal, as the moment is; it is passing, as the moment is; past, as the moment in the next moment; and yet it is decisive; and yet it is filled with the eternal. A moment such as this must have a special name. Let us call it: ‘the fullness of time.’”

Naturally, much is written in theological science and religious studies about conversions, but to study its durability in terms of the follow-up conduct, the researcher’s attention now turns to psychological and sociological papers on the theme. In their research article investigating spiritual conversion and religious change among college students, Zinnbauer and Pargament (1998) give a brief history of nearly a hundred years of conversion research in the social sciences. According to this, research reflects either a classic or a contemporary paradigm. The classical view or definition, drawing on the road-to-Damascus experience as a generic example, regards conversion as a sudden or gradual process where the self radically, but not necessarily, purposefully transforms “for the better.” A more contemporary view sees it as a typically gradual and self-conscious process and as such “represents a humanistic alternative to the determinism of the classic paradigm” (Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998, 162).

While some scholars tried to identify causes or motifs for conversion, others endeavoured to develop predictive models that “characterize conversion as the result of personal predisposing factors and situational determinants” (Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998, 162). Research studies inquiring into the precipices of conversions (Starbuck 1899; James [1902] 1961) report that it often follows a stressful period, a sense of confusion or depression, which is resolved through the experience. Several theoretical discussions claim that emotional turmoil precedes sudden conversion experiences (Bragan 1977; Galanter 1982; Meadow and Kahoe 1984). However, in some cases, it is neither stress nor an insatiable search that particularly conditions and precipitates the experience, which takes place with no prior indications.

Evidently, these turns can be of different character. The relevant literature differentiates between religious and spiritual conversions, and makes mention of secular and ideological conversions, too (Meadow and Kahoe 1984). Within the confines of spirituality, it is stated that people can be converted to a religion, a religious group, or a spiritual force such as God or God’s humanly personalised forms (Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998). Notwithstanding, conversion accounts can also be found where a spiritual force cannot be named.

One such possible narrative is quoted in Ims’ (2015) article about deep ecology. Ims quotes the conversion story of environmentalist Aldo Leopold, whose encounter with a wolf triggered a total rearrangement of his life and contributed to the development of an ecocentric land ethic. The story took place at a time when the U.S. government, in its eager desire to eradicate wolves from the country, entrusted Leopold to implement the policy accordingly. One morning, in a group with fellow hunters, Leopold and friends started shooting wolves and cubs in their excited hope of what the sport promised: a “hunter’s paradise.” He is quoted by Ims:

In a second we were pumping lead into the pack, but with more excitement than accuracy: how to aim a steep downhill shot is always confusing. When our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable slide-rocks. We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain....; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, no wolves would mean a hunter’s paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view. (Ims 2015, 52)
Supporters of deep ecology, Ims (2015) continues to explain, stress the significance of the spontaneous experience exemplified by the green fire dying in the wolf’s eyes. Incidentally, this conversion later led to writings that are classified as “religious naturalism” (Stone 2008), and in that sense and in this instance, Aldo Leopold pursued a career and life-path that can rightly be called spiritual. The quote itself already carries a spiritual connotation through a personalisation of the mountain that can be understood as a representation of the sacred. Yet, as for others, the story could have continued differently and nonspiritually. To what extent this makes a difference for the radicality and long-lastingness of change, as the question was posed above, or to what extent spiritual and nonspiritual conversions are different in nature, could be the quest for future research.

Spiritual Conversion and Diet in the Hare Krishna and Seventh-day Adventist Communities

**Empirical Settings and Methodology**

The researcher visited several Hare Krishna eco-farms in the United Kingdom and Eastern Europe and one Seventh-day Adventist farm in East Africa. Both organisations advocate vegetarianism, and they were chosen to obtain comparative and qualitative dietary data between different spiritualities and geographies. The original research question was to understand the connection between spirituality and sustainable food practices.

The researcher volunteered for several months in these organisations and collected data as a participant observer and conducted a total of twenty-nine interviews. My status as researcher was known to all participants, which apparently caused no disturbances among them in terms of their conduct and reactions. Most participants were outgoing and thrilled to be interviewed, and none were embarrassed or nervous to relate their personal experience. The interviews were based upon open-ended questions which mostly served to guide through the talks smoothly, without losses and indecisive pauses. The questions relevant to this article were like these: How did you meet the community? What was your life like before? Could you tell me about your personal experiences? Do you find it hard to maintain a meat-free diet?

For the purposes of this article, the researcher will ignore most of the insightful differences between the two groups and locations and focus on the similarities instead. Other interesting themes, such as the history and particularities of Krishna and Adventist diet will not be described here. The researcher will present the theme as a coherent one, and not in distinction, except for one representative case taken from each of the groups respectively.

As mentioned before, the topic of miraculous conversion emerged after data collection only. Though the researcher was, from the onset, interested in connecting spirituality to dietary change, this connection was not expected to be partly traceable to the rich spiritual accounts eventually obtained. It was the depth of these narratives that later turned my attention to the conversion literature and led to questions about the dietary importance of the phenomenon. However, it must also be noted that not all converts reported or emphasized supernatural elements in their narratives. Some made their choice to join a spiritual community by reading a book or simply by looking for a “meaningful” alternative.

**Diet-related Spiritual Conversions**

As outlined earlier, spiritual conversions can either be regarded as sudden or at least concrete and memorable, recallable experiences on the one hand and gradual, less remarkable processes on the other. In this latter sense, all community members can be regarded and do regard themselves as converts. In the narrower sense of the word, road-to-Damascus experiences, highly emotional in nature, are reported only by a smaller section of the groups. Notwithstanding, even the more reserved and cognitively expressed narratives of gradual converts, practically all of them, make
mention of providential leading and “divine arrangement” in their accounts. They may lack the fervent and emotional intensity of sudden and miraculous accounts, yet there is a story to tell in most cases, and communicating it is often a tacit requirement by the church structure (Rambo 1993). To some, the journey took off by an already established interest in dietary matters, whether based on compassion, health-related issues, or both. Others were led by purely spiritual promptings, a desire for a better alternative, something fulfilling, when an invitation for a certain event, programme, or meeting “just arrived at the right time and place.” Often, even after decades of the experience, narration includes statements like these:

- “When I was walking down the streets of Liverpool…”
- “I visited my sister in Edinburgh, and who should I bump into but the friend who…”
- “I was in my grandmother’s library, picked a book randomly from the shelf, opened it up, and lo and behold, it was talking about veganism, just when I most needed answers to my struggles…”

Even these shortly relatable memories remained fresh in the mind after long years, often decades. Of the more road-to-Damascus type, several members talked about “divine arrangement” through angelic apparitions or human encounters that “must have been brought about” by angels. One Hare Krishna devotee said: “If someone is searching after God, He will bring him together with those who already connect with Him…He gives obvious signs, and after a while you can personally recognise His help… We experience this miracle daily.” In some cases, corresponding to oriental belief in reincarnation, human encounters took place as if the persons newly met had always known each other. Reports were made of dreams in which guidance was given for the future. Interestingly, in frequent instances, community members recalled that they had actually not been seeking any institutionally religious changes in life. Sometimes even the opposite was the case, trying to escape from any encounters with the newly presented faith or lifestyle. In this sense, these accounts resemble that of the apostle Paul’s story, who was addressed as follows: “I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the goads” (Acts 9:5). In other words, to keep on resisting the warnings previously given him.

With regards to food, be the conversion sudden or gradual, all respondents unanimously found it palatable and healthy, an easy dietary option to shift to. As diet forms an important part of both communities, most of the members found their way to the faith through some food-related event. One of the respondents, a previous environmentalist, explained that as vegetarianism, to a degree, often forms as part of environmental agendas, he had gone meat-free several times, sometimes for a few months, sometimes for a whole year. But when he embraced spirituality some twenty years ago, the practice settled into his life once and for all. In his opinion, people become vegetarian for emotional, health or religious reasons, of which he thinks the “most stable practitioners are those who have a philosophical understanding to bolster practice.” In this community, spirituality is called the “glue” that holds the religious team and its practices together.

In the very few cases where food was not particularly liked to begin with, it became appreciated later. Some were attracted to the community through ideas of growing food, organic gardening, or simply the spirituality it offered. Reports were made about the supportive atmosphere provided by the community’s forbearance with addicts and their relapses. The outside activities, community programmes, and better spiritual and mental discernment were mentioned as being supportive during the processes of change, whether they required short or long periods of time. In some instances, the process of change took years, sometimes decades. The community atmosphere which converts find themselves entering during or after their conversion experiences was generally reported to be highly encouraging.

In what follows, the researcher will introduce in more detail two conversion stories, one from each community, that seem to represent similar experiences on their respective farms, as
well as the wider international organisations to which they belong. These accounts stand only to
demonstrate the depth and uniqueness of conversion narratives in eco-spiritual communities.
Quoting smaller sections from several of the interviews would not shed as much light as the more
detailed presentation of the individual cases.

**Hare Krishna Conversion Account**

Hare Krishna devotee Michael (pseudonym) had been leading a nonconformist lifestyle in the
English countryside when he, one day, walking across a field, witnessed the birth of a calf. As he
saw the immediately formed, tender, and intimate bond between mother and calf, he instantly
experienced a change of mind that has never left him since. The experience was triggered by the
way mother and calf looked at each other and the mother was “licking off the mess” from the
baby. It was obvious from then onwards that he would not be eating anything “that has four legs”
young more. “It was a very emotional moment,” concludes Michael. This encounter with the four-
legged animals was later followed by serendipitous meetings with a woman devotee whom he
refers to in his talk as an angelic and motherly figure.

But the story of that day with the calf did not end there. To demonstrate the qualitative depth
of such experiences, I cannot do better than to quote Michael’s own words:

> And then I walked on, and then that night I sat at the harbour and I...in those days, I still
used to eat fish. So, in those days I still used to eat fish, and that night I sat at the
harbour with my fishing rod and started catching some fish to eat, but after a bit I got
strangely greedy and just kept fishing, just kept catching them, killing and catching and
killing them. After about ten fish, it just suddenly happened, I saw the last one looking
at me with its eye, you know, like “What’s going on?” as I was about to kill it. And I
felt this sort of strange feeling, as if I was being watched. Not paranoia, because it was
dark and in the middle of nowhere, but there was this feeling that I’d done something
very wrong, and somebody has seen me do it. Because I just used to think, “Well, if I
kill it I can eat it, you know, it’s OK—because I hadn’t met the woman yet, didn’t know
about Krishna or anything.”

This was a few weeks before I met this lady, so I thought, well, I would now eat them as
I killed them, apart from the last one that I threw back in the water. So I went into a
public toilet to find a plastic bag, a bin bag to put the fish in. So there were a few items
in the bottom of this bag, so I emptied them on the floor, and what fell out was a
pornographic magazine. So I thought we don’t want that around, that sort of thing. I was
raised by Catholics and it’s just a bad thing, but as I lifted it to move it, a little book fell
out of it and it was a Hare Krishna book: *The Nectar of Instruction*. And it was in a
pornographic magazine in a toilet, so I must have been led to that by some sort of an
angel or something like that. So as I was sitting down and reading it, I just threw all the
fish back in the sea, even though they were dead.

I just didn’t want anything to do with them and I sat up all night in a cave on a beach—
and it was very secluded—and just read the whole of this book by the candles and I
began to see there was a better life, you know, than being like a hippy and smoking
dope and going and killing fish, and stuff like that. And that walking about across the
countryside is beautiful, but it’s not necessarily gonna take you to the love and back to
God, as it actually keeps you here, sort of thing.

So then a few days after that I was sitting back in this cave, outside it, with my little
coffer, and I had some bread that had gone a bit hard; I couldn’t eat it. So I was sitting
there, just throwing the bread to the seagulls, and I began to watch them, and I could see
they all had different personalities. They weren’t just a seagull; every seagull was different to the other seagull. Then there were other kinds of birds coming there, and then because I was kind of on a seeking-myself pilgrimage—you know, to find myself and all that—I was seeing lots of spiritual things, like herons would land with the seagulls, and then crows from the forest would land, and lots of tiny little birds that were, you know, squeaking about, and I was just feeding them and I was thinking, like: “Look at me, I am like St. Francis of Assisi,” you know, because he was very godly and he liked the animals. And then I began to watch them and think “chickens are the same as these, they are birds as well,” and I’d been eating lots of chicken, especially in my Chinese food, and I thought “no, no, I can’t anymore,” you know, like that…Yeah. The birds...So I decided to stop eating mammals and fish and birds, all in like a matter of two or three weeks. And then, just a week or so afterwards, as I was just walking through the town with my wife, I saw that lady called…

Then Michael continues to relate his experiences in gradually understanding and accepting the messages of Krishna, which he first received with wariness and doubtful suspicion. Alongside these messages, however, came the introduction to Krishna food, which Michael remembers receiving with great appreciation. Again, in his words:

So I began to think at first that maybe it was another cult, you know. Maybe it was another man with lots of Rolls-Royce cars and people going around blindly worshipping him. But then, I kind of…it was the food that got me, but not just the wonderful taste and how cheap it is to make it, you know—it was the fact that it’s good, honest food. There are no additives or anything in there, it’s just food that was cooked for well over 5,000 years in India, and it’s kept all those Indians alive, you know? I thought that maybe just kitcheree—the rice and dahl and vegetable, you know—was good enough.

So it’s got a pedigree, you know? It goes back thousands of years. It wasn’t just invented, like, you know, the Italians giving us pasta meals or the Belgians giving us fish and chips. It’s not just pizzas or McDonald’s, it’s a food that goes back forever and ever and ever, until to the days when the gods were on Earth and, you know, they ate that food. So it’s just so special. And then you find out that you can’t actually taste it while you are cooking it. You are not really supposed to smell it or taste it because it’s got to go to God first. So that takes skill and trusting, confidence that when you offer it, God will make it alright even if you make a few mistakes.

And again:

I went to their programme and it just felt at home, going after all those years in solitude in the mountains and forest. And of course the food came in, the Prasad—and there the cook is, in my opinion, the best cook in ISKCON—and there is something magical about it. I can’t get enough of it. I once asked her: “What do you put in it that makes it so special?” and she said, “L&D.” And I thought, “What, like LSD?” And she went: “No, it stands for Love and Devotion.” So that’s a magic ingredient.

Later, Michael explained in more detail how he gradually accepted the faith; a journey which was highly supported by the Krishna food and the vegetarian diet he had already embraced. With him, as well as many others, the story of his dietary change began on his own, to be continued through the support of the community he found later. It was first and foremost animal compassion that prompted him to quit certain types of foods, but it becomes obvious, especially from the rest of the conversation, that he shows great awareness of issues of health, too.
The spiritual aspects of food, prepared and offered with love and devotion, and the whole orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the Krishna community, continues to have a tenacious grip upon his life. His conversion narrative, to be certain, is a product of remembering, rethinking, and repeatedly recalling memories of times when his journey began. Indeed, his lifestyle from a hippy mountain-dweller and dope user radically changed within a reasonably short time, while changing his diet only took him a few weeks.

Michael is in retirement age now. Decades have passed since his eyes met the mother cow, the calf, and the fish in moments of contemplation. It appears from his account that when the “fullness of time” arrives in the form of eco-spiritual conversion, the grip of a new diet is not only strong and tenacious, but long-lasting as well.

**Seventh-day Adventist Conversion Account**

Likewise, the conversion narratives in the Adventist community in East Africa also carry radical and apparently long-lasting effects. Steven (pseudonym) first met the Adventist message through books twenty-seven years ago, as a member of the Catholic denomination. He was an avid reader, and all he wanted to do was to inquire into spiritual interpretations of certain Biblical concepts. Coming from a family of priests, he first wanted to keep away from what he thought was probably a shameful association, but he eagerly read the books while still trying to question and doubt their veracity. He opposed visiting the church with the classmate who supplied him with the books he was reading. He remembers being physically weak and unwell at the time of his encounter with the health message represented by Adventism. Again, the story is best told by the convert himself:

Yeah, I got it from books, yeah. Because from that book—it was some health book—I got some message. First it was those eight laws, eight laws of health, and because when I was a Catholic I used to—I mean, I didn’t drink water. It was just a little bit per day. And I was suffering, always suffering, from my headaches. I felt pain, I felt tiredness, and because of that I used Panadol, the pain killer, so I always took a lot of drugs when I was at secondary school. So after I got the message—it was from Doug Bachelor—he was speaking about those eight laws, and he spoke about water. So I say, “Oh, is it true what he is saying?” At that time, I was still struggling. So after I got that knowledge, I said, “I am going to try it.” So I took some water—one litre—and started drinking, and that pain which was there for more than thirteen years, that was part and parcel of my life, it went. And I couldn’t believe it. Only by using more water!

My mother now, she is appreciative of my health. She compares how I was with how I am doing now. Before that, when I was still young, I was somehow sick, not physically fit. And I was not doing this physical work, because my family was employed. At the place there was mining; my father was working there, and they were teaching us, you know. Working for health, the people don’t have education, so I was weak somehow. But now, working hard—and I praise God—I am healthy. Not one hundred percent, but you can’t compare it with that life.

Steven also related his dream in which he was shown a church building, without any display on its front, which he later found on a real-life journey. On entering the church, he learned that it was an Adventist congregation, where he has remained ever since, despite his family’s opinion and the shame he previously felt for his interest in the community. During the conversation, he argued that vegetarianism is a better alternative for good spiritual and mental discernment and stated that he would never again want to return to the diet he previously followed. On this diet, he claims, the teachings of the Bible became understandably clear, a fact that he experienced for himself. Once he tried to return to meat, for a while, but the “great suffering” it caused to his
stomach dissuaded him from it for a lifetime. He also remembered an experience in a factory farm in Dar es Salaam where a customer offered to take a chicken that was already dead. He felt disgusted by the thought of consuming diseased animal flesh. As a matter of fact, it was a visit to his brother’s battery cage of 2,000 hens that lead to his final decision.

I was eating meat, but not much. I stopped eating meat when I went to visit my brother in Dar es Salaam. When I saw things, how things went, I decided I would prefer not to take it. Because my brother was keeping chickens in this broiler, this cell, and with the food that he gave them, and how he treated them, some chickens died, and people would come to buy them. One day, I saw a chicken which had died, and they took it, because it is Dar es Salaam, it’s a city.

“No,” I said. “Why do you do it, my brother?” This is life. My brother used to throw them away, the dead ones, but the one who came said, “You can give it to me.”…Yes, I cannot slaughter. I cannot come to a chicken and cut it. Oh no, I can’t. No, no, no. I don’t like to see it.

After joining the church, Steven opted to work for a community farm, the target location of this research, in order to gain more knowledge about his newly found spiritual belief and its health-related aspects. As a father of two, settled on the undulating slopes of the Adventist eco-farm, he and his wife cannot imagine returning to their previous diet and urban lifestyle.

Above conversion accounts serve to demonstrate the recurring elements of eco-spiritual conversions. While all the conversions referenced in this paper, and in the related literature, are unique and personal in nature, there are some general attributes that can be listed as follows:

- They result in radical (and proposedly long-lasting) changes.
- They are often triggered by a search for new meanings to life (and not for new religion).
- They are sometimes characterised by spontaneous, coincident, miraculous events.
- They are connected to issues of food and dietary change through compassion or health.
- They may be sudden and recallable, or gradual and less relatable to single or major events.

Discussion

Above, I have introduced two conversion narratives recorded in the Hare Krishna and the Seventh-day Adventist communities. Both communities advocate meat-free diets, though the overall tone for their reason differs widely. Irrespective of this, the nature of these conversion stories is such as to enhance the process of shifting to and maintaining a new diet. Whether emanating from an original interest in food or spirituality, as seen from the two samples respectively, diet plays a crucial role in the life and messages of these communities. The emotional messages of Love and Devotion, as well as dreams or healing experiences, seem to have a long-lasting influence on their adherent converts. Indeed, relevant social scientific literatures emphasise the potential agency for change of psychosomatic elements such as affects, feelings and emotions (Clough 2008). Besides living in close connectivity with nature, daily partaking in the support of the community, and besides the involvement-based activities—which are now widely claimed to be helpful to shift to and maintain more sustainable practices—the spiritual and emotional elements of conversion can be seen as an additional trigger to the same end.

Drawing on Latour (2005) through Wennel’s (2016) interpretation introduced earlier on, spiritual conversions, when accompanied by the orthopraxy of meat-free diets, may serve as
plug-ins for consumer competences (for vegetarianism) unavailable to non-spiritual consumers. To conceptualise the dietary practice in eco-spiritual communities one step further, attending to some insights of Social Practice Theory (SPT) will be helpful. Following the concepts of SPT, which is a middle-range theory for understanding and interpreting social practices, I hereby briefly outline how the dietary competences of eco-spiritual communities are enhanced by the repeated conveyance of conversion narratives.

SPT postulates that practices evolve and survive through their main elements of meanings, materials and competences, and the dynamic coevolution and interrelation of these three (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). According to the interviews and observations made in the target communities, it is very clear that emotional conversion stories remap the meanings-materials-competences union by the strengthening of each of these elements. Meanings (or reasons, intentions, and beliefs) are highly secured and cultivated by these narratives which can also be understood as testimonies to the faith, as there are dense elements of orthodoxy in them. (For instance, Michael finding the Krishna food as the original, Steven having a dream about an Adventist church building, etc.). The competence for the vegetarian dietary choice is maintained by the exclusively spiritual plug-ins of the faith (such as its teachings and spiritual practices), by favouring its taste, cultivating feelings of compassion, or experiencing healing during periods of conversion and beyond, just to name a few. In turn, as one major project, the community and its members are organised into epistemic communities which ensure that all the materials, such as healthy food items, special ingredients, and necessary equipment are in place to support dieters in their vegetarian practices. This partly happens through growing their own food, as in the case of these eco-farms, but the outreach events of the worldwide movements, such as lectures, cooking shows, or exhibitions, also serve for securing materials and material knowledge for future competence. The usefulness of the cognitive assistance and practical guidance of online communities (recipes, idea exchange, and communicating events) is also acknowledged (Shove, Pantzar, and Watson 2012). Thus, it appears that remembering and repeating one’s conversion experiences, as one possible plug-in for sustainability in eco-spiritual communities, also plays its part in contributing to the solidification of the dietary grip.

Though in its philosophy, SPT refers to practices and their stabilisation or change as highly contingent phenomena, it is also proposed that any constellation (not to say intervention) to encourage or strengthen the elements of practices, creates conducive environments for their survival. If elements of practice are strengthened through a wider variety of plug-ins than in non-spiritual contexts, it seems evident that the practice itself becomes more stable in these communities. It is, in this respect, that the researcher assumes that a practice (vegetarianism) that seems to be more durable in eco-spiritual communities will concomitantly recruit practitioners that are more persevering in following the practice.

Summary and Conclusions

Despite the subtle differences of approach and definitions, and despite the variability of the phenomenon itself, most researchers agree that the process of conversion involves and results in a radical behaviour change (Lofland 1977; Heirich 1977; Ullman 1989). A new way of thinking (metanoia) leads to radically new ways of conduct, as shown from the Scriptural narratives and the contemporary examples. To repeat, there are differences in explaining whether this change simply occurs as a direct consequence of the experience, or comes as a solution actively sought by the convert. The important point to make is a declaration by Snow and Machalek (1984), according to which “the notion of radical change remains at the core of all conceptions of conversion.”

According to my proposition, this radicality extends to long-lastingness, an attribute which, to the best of my knowledge, neither the theoretical nor the research literature addresses. Potential endeavours to test this would encounter a methodological dilemma caused by the retrospective nature of conversion analyses. Some authors, such as Beckford (1978) and
Richardson, Stewart, and Simmonds (1978) claim that the conversion stories give modified narratives of the past and describe the presence in an idealized form of utopia. In reflection, Zinnbauer and Pargament (1998) suggest that these claims and the potential levels of distortion need to be empirically studied in more detail. Notwithstanding, this present research is not concerned with the level of veracity and plausibility of the conversion accounts given. Instead, it is the radicality and long-lastingness resulting from the change and manifested in practice that receive prominence.

To conclude, one may ask: is (sudden) conversion a necessary additive to radical and long-lasting change within spiritual grounds? The answer is, most likely, not. In their quoted study about the conversion (or nonconversion) of religious college students, Zinnbauer and Pargament (1998) found no significant differences between the two groups in terms of behaviour change. The only difference they found was that what took a short time to converts (those going through supernatural experience), required a longer period from “non-converts.”

To reiterate, sudden or concrete conversion experiences in eco-spiritual communities may be regarded as additional but not necessary ingredients (plug-ins) for spirituality and sustainability. Repeatedly sharing these experiences (Rambo 1993) appears to contribute to the stabilisation of sustainable practices, however, metanoia—the change of mindset and conduct—is not the only precursor of recallable and conveyable narratives in spiritual communities. In terms of the concept of plug-ins, it is possible for “non-converts” to turn to, as environmental plug-ins, the teachings of the group, the conversion story belonging to another, their own gradual conversion journey, and the providential miracles perceived (to be such) daily in one’s or the community’s life.

Thus, beyond the cognitive orthodoxies and practical opportunities offered by involvement, eco-spiritual community members can depend on a variety of alternative sources that encourage more sustainable practices, including diets. Conversion stories can be understood as one such source to be plugged into, available only to those capable of “downloading” them (Latour 2005).

Conceptualised in isolation, eco-spiritual conversion already offers much support to the view of understanding follow-up change to be just as long-lasting as it is radical. Considering all the additional plug-ins which eco-spiritual communities have on offer, the final hypothesis is that (dietary) change occurring through eco-spiritual communities is more long-lasting than where spirituality is absent. Further quantitative research is needed to test this proposition.

REFERENCES


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*Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* explores new possibilities for sustainable food production and human nutrition. It provides an interdisciplinary forum for the discussion of agricultural, environmental, nutritional, health, social, economic, and cultural perspectives on food. Articles range from broad theoretical and global policy explorations to detailed studies of specific human-physiological, nutritional, and social dynamics of food. The journal examines the dimensions of a "new green revolution" that will meet our human needs in a more effective, equitable, and sustainable way in the twenty-first century.

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