Westerners converting to Buddhism: An exploratory grounded theory investigation

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A 'new Buddhism' has been emerging in the Western world for some time. An important area for research concerns the mechanisms by which people are engaging with the various traditions of this religion. Starting with sensitising concepts from religious conversion theory and transpersonal psychology, a grounded theory study was undertaken to investigate these mechanisms. Three committed Buddhists were interviewed and transcripts of their interviews carefully analysed to produce a higher-order explanation of the processes revealed. A model of religious conversion has emerged from the data that centres around a 'Test for Fit' between the potential convert and the religion in question. In terms of this model, religious conversion is the product of a successful match between the individual and a given religion in a social context that does not preclude the conversion. It was determined that while conversion theory offers the best currently available explanation to explain Westerners engaging with Buddhism, it needs to be expanded to account for the 'Test for Fit' model.

Introduction

In a recent anthology of Buddhist scholarly studies, James Coleman defines a 'new Buddhism [that] is now emerging in the industrialised nations of the West' (1999, p. 91). That Buddhism is becoming increasingly popular in the West is recognised in most current studies of Buddhism in psychology, sociology and comparative theology. Why this might be so, however, is far less clear.

The question is also confused by some uncertainty as to how Buddhists are defined and how Buddhists define themselves. Tweed (1999) makes the point that there are degrees of engagement within Buddhism that range from full commitment to Buddhist practices, beliefs and lifestyles, to what he terms 'night-stand Buddhists' – people who are likely to have a book about Buddhism on their bedside tables, but who do not actually practice Buddhism and may even regularly go to a Christian church.

A further division within Buddhism in the West separates adherents who have grown up in a Buddhist family – what Tweed calls 'cradle Buddhists' – and Westerners who have converted to Buddhism – 'convert Buddhists'. Whatever terminology is used, there is a broad consensus that the two groups exist, and that they are radically different from each other. The first group is comprised mainly of immigrants and the descendents of immigrants to the West from Asian countries such as China, Japan and Thailand, whose practice of Buddhism is situated in their cultural and ethnic identity. The second group – with whom we are more interested in this study – is comprised mainly of Westerners who have switched from their own religious traditions and embraced Buddhism from within a Western cultural context. Tweed notes that the 'essentialist-normative' (*ibid*. p. 80) labelling of adherents to a religious group (i.e., defined by formal membership, or whether a convert has undergone initiatory rituals) ignores both '*quality* of membership and *commitment* to the tradition' (*ibid*. original emphasis). He suggests a more open and inclusive approach to identifying religious membership, based more on self-identification than external criteria.

Notwithstanding the problems with defining what constitutes a Buddhist, it is apparent that new Buddhists represent a small yet significant minority of the Western population – young, affluent, liberal, intelligent and overwhelming white (Baumann, 1997; Coleman, 1999; Mayer, Kosmin & Keisar, 2002). Why have these people turned to Buddhist traditions, and what are the psychological factors and processes that influenced or precipitated this conversion to an exotic Eastern religion?

Cognitive and social psychological approaches to conversion

Most research investigating this sort of religious change is particularly concerned with conversion to evangelical Christian groups or to the so-called New Religious Movements. We cannot assume that the mechanisms will be identical when we turn to the examination of the Buddhist participants in this study. Further, Lewis Rambo, one of the most prominent figures in the field of contemporary conversion studies, comments that 'it's very difficult to find a psychologist who writes about [conversion] without framing it as a pathology or a deviance' (1998, para. 9). Importantly, Rambo (*ibid*.) points out that there is no unified theory of the psychology of conversion:

'What we have in fact are psychologies. There are multiple orientations in the field of psychology. There are also so many different kinds of conversion that it's very difficult for a scholar to say exactly what conversion is.' (para. 6)

Much contemporary thinking on conversion stems from sociology, notably the seminal work of Lofland and Stark (1965) whose step model is still cited in almost all papers on conversion. Lofland and Stark's model of conversion sets out a sequence of seven steps, each of which is necessary and sufficient to lead to the next, and subsequently, to religious conversion. These steps are divided into two distinct groups – the first group sets out a set of intrapsychic prerequisites of a potential convert and the second group consists of 'situational' factors including an 'encounter with the Divine' and inter-personal relationships with other converts as well as extra-group influences.

Lofland and Stark's model has been very influential, so much so that Lee (1996) observes that most of the research following their model has 'focused on proving or disproving the "process model"' (p. 147), or tries to combine this original model with other cognitive maps to counter critiques made of the process model.

One such paper (Pitt, 1991) combines the Lofland and Stark model with the cognitive balance model (Heider, 1958), in order to produce a view that 'denies neither individual agency nor the structural constraints placed on the individual by the group' (Pitt, 1991, p. 171). Pitt's 'preliminary model' starts with the religious socialisation of an individual, which can result in a state of cognitive imbalance which defines the individual as a 'candidate for conversion' (*ibid*. p.177).

Pitt expands his 'preliminary model' to account for the influence of social networks at the recruitment phase of conversion, but freely admits that even this 'revised' model (see Figure 1) is incomplete (*ibid*. p.181). Once contact has been made with a religious group, interpersonal ties become important (the *sine qua non* of conversion for Pitt), but are seen in the context of extra-group relations, another possible source of cognitive imbalance.
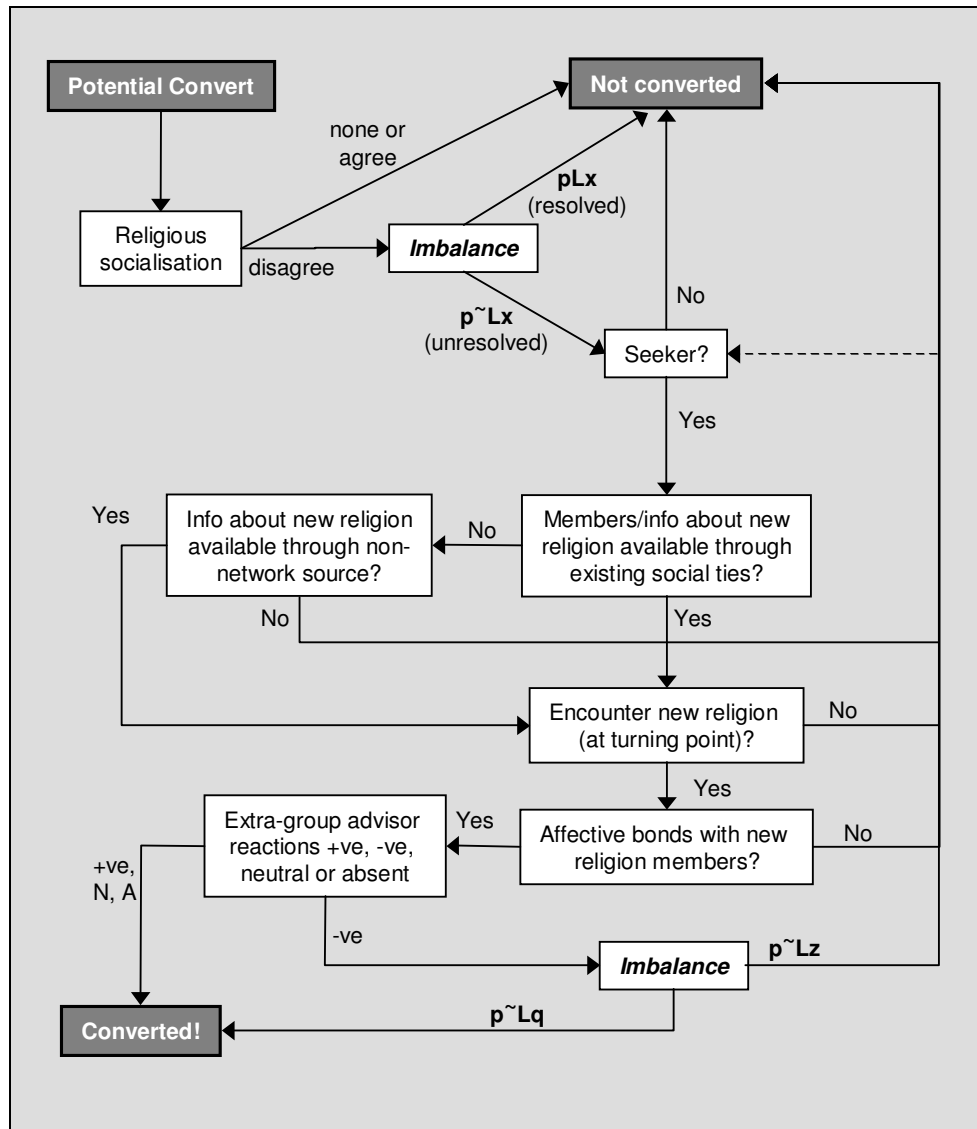
Figure 1. Pitt's (1991) revised Balance Theoretical Model

p = potential convert, x = original socialisation, z = new religion,

q = extra-group advisors, L = positive attitude, $\sim L$ = negative attitude

Lofland himself (Lofland & Skonovd 1981) later re-evaluated his position, moving away from proposing a universal process for all conversion experiences, to situating conversion within a set of six conversion 'motifs':

- **Mystical:** The most recognisable conversion motif (though actually very rare), e.g., of the Pauline variety, which may involve an 'acute hallucinatory episode' with high emotional arousal.

- **Experimental:** Conversion where participants experiment in – and participate in – the group or their rituals while examining and learning social roles, *before* committing themselves as converts.
- **Affectional:** Positive emotional bonds are the critical causal factor here, with belief arising from participation and interpersonal ties.
- **Revivalist:** Relatively rare, where highly emotionally charged events are staged to induce conversions in attendees. Some scepticism is expressed by Lofland and Skonovd themselves about the validity of this motif.
- **Coercive:** Popularly understood as 'brainwashing', and more common in ideological than religious conversion.
- **Intellectual:** This motif centres on the convert's own research, which leads to a conversion marked by illumination rather than ecstasy, and a high level of belief before participation in organised religious practice. This motif is a modern development, made possible by the increase of communication technology.

In a study on conversion to the modern religion of Wicca, Harrington (2000) proposes a further motif she calls the 'recognition motif' (para. 13) based on data gathered from a small sample of Wiccans. Harrington defined this new motif after noting that convert Wiccans usually find (or 'recognise') their religion after a prolonged time of active seeking, and that the process of conversion may have, in principle, occurred long before contact with any members of the religion has been made. Harrington (2000) suggests that:

> *'The 'recognition' motif is one which may only be relevant to minority religions such as Wicca which are not immediately available to the religious querant, but it may also be a valid addition to the Lofland and Skonovd motifs and a normal or very important part of religious conversion processes. It definitely deserves further study.'* (para. 37)

Lewis Rambo's response to the question: 'What is it that changes when a person converts?' is that this is something that he has 'struggled with over the years' (1998, para. 21). He is best known for his seven stage process-theory, of 'context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences' (Schwartz 2000, p. 9), but Rambo himself summarises his thinking as consisting of four factors within this

conversion process, which he sees as constant (in presence if not degree). We can confidently treat this as Rambo's 'definition' of a conversion, and these four factors bear examination:

- **Kinship & friendship networks:** 'People who convert or change religions usually do so through personal contact, and not through impersonal methods of communication' (Rambo, 1998, para. 22).
- **Relationships, especially with group leader:** The relationships within the community of converts are often very close, and sometimes 'formalised' by the taking on of familial labels for one's fellows – 'Brother', 'Sister', 'Father', 'Mother'.
- **Change in discourse:** When a person has converted, he or she takes on a new interpretive framework and buys into the rhetoric of the new group.
- **The role of the convert:** Converts' perception of their identity is altered in a way 'that often empowers them to do things, to believe things, and to feel things that they have not been able to prior to that time' (Rambo, 1998, para 24).

Transpersonal perspectives

The transpersonal critique of all extant conversion theory must surely be that it does not allow for the recognition of an authentic spiritual quest, the object of which is the transformation of the self, or the realisation of higher truths, or whatever the goals may be of any one of the various transformative spiritual disciplines and traditions of the world.

What transpersonal psychology specifically has to offer to conversion theory is the inclusion of the notion of conversion as spiritual transformation, or more broadly perhaps as part of the general development of a human being beyond the realms of the purely personal. This might extend the notion of personal change from a set of social and cognitive processes to a more meaningful appreciation of the spiritual urges and motivations that underlie the outward, measurable, change in membership status from one (or no) religion to another.

In a literature review on the topic, Schwartz (2000, p.4) defines spiritual transformation as:

'a dramatic change in religious belief that occurs over a relatively short period of time … this change usually occurs within three contexts:

1. *As an intensified devotion within the same religious structure;*
2. *A shift from no religious commitment to a devout religious life; or*
3. *A change from one religion to another.'*

Schwartz's 'relatively short period of time', it should be pointed out, is flexible enough to specifically include transformations that occur 'gradually or via a "sudden" experience' (*ibid.* p. 6). While conversion is, for Schwartz, neither a necessary nor a sufficient indicator for spiritual transformation, it would seem that some form of transformation is implicit in many if not all religious conversion experiences.

Walsh (2000) borrows from the existentialist tradition to explain both the 'bewildering ambiguity and unsatisfactoriness at the heart of everyday life' and the 'limitations and seduction of conventionality' (pp. 5-7). He explains that within transpersonal psychology we can view the mature and spiritual response to what the existential philosophers labelled inauthenticity and self-alienation, and that to relieve this we must grow towards an awakening of our deeper identity.

The language used by transpersonal psychologists is markedly different to the language of the researchers of religious conversion. However, as conversion theory matures to include once again the idea of the convert as an active agent in their own conversion rather than a passive victim of social or cognitive forces beyond one's own control, this language of spiritual transformation must be included in conversion theory if we are to remain true to the lived experience of being a convert, to hold fast to the empirical data that converts themselves report.

Rationale for the present study

Conversion theory has traditionally been firmly based on studies and understandings of monotheistic religious traditions, often rooted in principle in traditional Western religions, and may not be suitable to explain the attraction to Westerners of Eastern religion in general and, in particular, of the atheistic creed of Buddhism. However, the relationship between religious conversion theory and ideological conversion theory might be seen as promising a more inclusive understanding of the basic processes at work in conversion to Buddhism.

To understand the processes of conversion in an area where little or no previous research has been done requires a methodology whose ultimate aim is the generation of novel theory. To be at all robust or valid, this new theory must be rooted in the experiences of people who have undergone this conversion.

To this end, a grounded theory methodology was adopted for the current study. A small but carefully selected set of convert Buddhists was recruited, who had all been actively practicing for some time, with the aim of uncovering the ways in which they became involved in their practice.

Methodology

Design

In order to come to an understanding of the central question of this paper, a grounded theory approach was employed. Grounded theory was first developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in their seminal *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, and was later developed by Strauss and Corbin in *The Basics of Qualitative Research* (1990). Grounded theory involves a set of qualitative methods which 'consist of systematic inductive guidelines for gathering, synthesising, analysing and conceptualising qualitative data to construct theory' (Smith 2003, p.82). The central concern of grounded theory methodology is the generation of theory that is firmly grounded in the data gathered during the research process.

<u>Participants</u>

The development of theory demands a type of purposive sampling that Glaser and Strauss (1967) term *theoretical sampling*, in which 'you sample for the purpose of *developing* your emerging theory, not for the representation of a population or the generalisability of your results' (Smith 2003, p. 104, original emphasis). The present study specifically utilised a *maximal variation* sampling strategy to integrate a small number cases which are as different as possible to explore variations in the phenomenon being studied (cf. Flick, 2002).

Participants were contacted individually through two active meditation centres in the North West of England. These centres represented two 'new' Buddhist traditions (Vajrayana and Zen). The two Buddhist schools are markedly different in both their outward practices and aesthetics, but ultimately have similar worldviews, both closely following traditional Mahayana Buddhist philosophies. While both stem from monastic orders in Tibet and Japan which have transplanted to the West as largely lay organisations, the Zen group holds close to original Japanese rituals and practices, while the Tibetan group maintains some elements of the ritual, especially as regards the focused meditations, but is markedly more Western in outward appearances.

The first author attended meditation sessions at both centres and raised the subject of this research with members of the groups. From these attendances, three participants were selected who were willing to take part in an in-depth interview on the subject of their involvement with Buddhism. Inclusion criteria were that participants would all be European males over the age of 25, whose commitment to practice was evidenced by a period of at least five years of regular practice. In addition, the participant selection differentiated between the participants on a number of other variables (see Table 1).

Pseudonyms have been used throughout this report to ensure anonymity. The participants will be referred to as Richard, Andrew and John. The roles of the participants vary from teacher (in Richard's case) to committed group member in the case of John. However, all participants had 'taken Refuge' in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – requiring participation in a membership ritual – and all have committed

themselves to the 'Five Vows' of lay Buddhists. In spite of this, John does not openly label himself as a Buddhist, though his commitment to Zen is overt and obvious.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

	Richard	**Andrew**	**John**
Tradition	Vajrayana (Tibetan)	Mahayana (Zen)	Mahayana (Zen)
Role	Teacher	Local leader	Bodhisattva
Buddhist identity	Overt	Cautious	Denied
Relationship with partner	Partner actively involved	Negative / 'jealous'	Generally supportive

Procedure

Interview times were arranged with participants, and interviews were later carried out on the premises where the groups met. All three participants were briefed on confidentiality, anonymity and right to withdraw before the interview took place, and all subjects gave verbal consent. Interviews were, once permission was obtained, recorded on a handheld tape-recorder and transcribed verbatim.

To conduct the interviews themselves, a semi-structured interview protocol was drawn up in light of the explicit aims of the research, the sensitising concepts discussed earlier, and the researcher's understanding of Buddhism.

The protocol consisted of a set of six general areas of interest: brief life history, first contact with Buddhism, current experience of Buddhism, identification as a Buddhist, commitment to Buddhism, and unsolicited themes. Each of the first five of these then included specific points that should be addressed throughout the interview. This open structure allowed the interviews to proceed as conversations rather than

formal question-and-answer sessions, while still ensuring that all the material deemed relevant to the study was covered.

Analysis

After repeated close readings of the interview transcripts, the coding process began with the identification of open codes, the basic 'unit' of analysis in grounded theory. As analysis continued, higher-order axial codes were developed from these initial codes that grouped them together conceptually. These axial codes form the basis for theory-building, and are often a step removed from the data – and thus more generalizable, as they require the identification of patterns that emerge from more than one source.

Patterns that started to emerge then provided the impetus for the literature review, as well as for re-examining the open coding that had previously been undertaken. To assist with the theory-building aim of the research, axial and open codes were used in the creation of models to describe the processes revealed in the data, and these models were revised as the coding continued.

During all stages of the analysis, a computer programme, QSR NVivo®, was used. It is important to note that qualitative analysis programmes, unlike statistical packages, do not actually *do* the analysis – rather they make it 'possible to manage, access and analyse qualitative data and to keep a perspective on all of the data, without losing its richness or the closeness to data that is critical for qualitative research' (Bazeley & Richards, 2000, p. v).

Concerns surrounding the use of computers in qualitative research centre on worries that computers impose an additional layer of mediation between the data and the researcher (Yates 2003). It has been suggested that the software packages 'implicitly force … structures upon the data and the researcher's analysis' (Flick, 2002, p. 261), a serious contention that cannot lightly be dismissed. However, it seems that whatever medium one uses for analysis, whether it be a computer or a set of box files with cut-out bits of interview transcript, some structural imposition is inevitable. That computers have brought these arguments into the limelight is something qualitative researchers should be grateful for, as an awareness of these concerns can only assist

our efforts to produce valid and reliable research by making us aware of the social, logical and linguistic structures in which all our work is produced.

Grounded theory is an iterative process of analysis and induction, not a linear, step-by-step technique, though presentation of results is best laid out in a more ordered fashion. The creation of higher-order axial codes occurred organically as the open coding was being undertaken and, similarly, tentative models were produced at different times during the course of analysis, and compared not just with the codes being generated but also with models that exist in the literature.

In all, 83 open codes were identified, though not all codes were present in each interview transcript. These codes represented themes and points of interest that came up during analysis of each interview. Open codes ranged in length from a few words to a paragraph, and the contents of each code were also quite varied – for some codes, the link was an event such as their first encounter with Buddhism, for others the content was more conceptual, such as insights about the psychological nature of suffering. As the analysis continued, more text was coded under many of the open codes from each of the participants. As the open coding progressed, a conceptual structure started to emerge from the data in the form of the axial codes and their relationships to one another.

Validity & Reliability in Qualitative Research

While there are many perspectives on questions of quality in qualitative research, one of the most used (and often least understood) strategies for ensuring rigorous analysis is *triangulation*: 'less a strategy for validating results and procedures than an *alternative to validation* which increases scope, depth and consistency in methodological findings' (Flick, 2002, p. 227, emphasis added). There are various forms of triangulation, the most well-known being 'methodological' triangulation, which (while not used for the current study) involves the application of a variety of methods in different combinations to the same data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). A second form of triangulation is 'theoretical triangulation' (Flick, 2002, pp. 226-7), which is particularly relevant to grounded theory methodology. This involves the researcher approaching the data with several theoretical perspectives and evaluating for each theory's 'best fit' with the data. This became an integral part of the iterative

process of this study. As codes and categories arose from the data, they were modelled and re-modelled to account for newly-generated concepts arising from the data.

As the literature search was being performed concurrently with the analysis, the opportunity arose to compare the emerging models with existing theories. For instance, an early theme that seemed to arise from the data was that of 'commitment' to religious groups, so theories of commitment were studied while analysis continued. After a time, it became apparent that the best fit with the data was not coming from the field of commitment theory (the work of Allport, 1950, and subsequent critics and authors), but from conversion theory. While a certain amount of common ground was indeed noted between the two (see especially Staples & Mauss, 1987), as both the analysis and the literature review continued it became clear that it was conversion theory that was most relevant to this study. This was an unexpected turn of events – while ideas of conversion were from the start expected to be important, the degree to which they came to dominate the study was surprising – and, as has been often mentioned in the literature of qualitative research, it is by definition 'surprise' that marks the emergence of data or theory that is genuinely grounded in the data rather than the researcher's preconceptions. Finally, the level of agreement between the model produced in the current study and that of Pitt (1991) gives further cause for confidence in this study's validity while allowing this study to expand on Pitt's work.

Results

The reporting of results from the analysis here cannot be exhaustive – there is simply too much that could be said in analysis of the four-and-a-half hours worth of interview data. What follows, then, is a summary of some of the most salient or indicative points that emerged during the analysis. Where codes are glossed over or omitted, it is not because they have not been carefully considered in themselves, but that they have been very carefully considered and found to have less relevance to the emergence of theory than other codes. Use of the first person indicates the first author.

Early life

All of the participants were brought up with some exposure to their familial religion, although religion did not play a central role in any of their families. All the

participants, though, reported that there was a sense that religion was supposed to involve more than the exoteric religious observances (or lack of them) of their parents.

> [Andrew] '… it didn't seem to make much sense. The face of religion, putting your Sunday best on and being on your best behaviour once a week didn't seem right. What did you do the other six days a week?'

After these early brushes with religion – they cannot be described as much more – each of them went into a 'latency' period during their teens. For John, an early period of interest with mysticism continued 'up to my early teens and then I just sort of got sidetracked', while Richard reports that he probably didn't think of religion 'very strongly' between his confirmation into the Lutheran Church and when he later came into contact with Buddhism. Andrew's split with religious concerns was more directly attributable to family problems – after his mother walked out on the family, he and his sister thought: 'What's God doing?' and both left the church.

Motivating insights

For Richard and John, there was a clear sense that their search for something 'other' was directed by an understanding of the world. While the content of these 'motivating insights' is very different for both of them, they have in common the property of crystallising and focusing their quest.

For John, the motivation is tied up with a dissatisfaction with the material world, the 'getting and spending' of modern life.

> [John] 'Then I suppose that about, well, I suppose about seven years ago, before I started [Zen], I became, I felt really unhappy, you know, and no longer satisfied by the car and the house, the material side of things.'

When I asked him what specifically made him search for religious solutions to his unhappiness, he reiterated:

> [John] 'Because I couldn't see anything else, I couldn't see any material satisfaction. I couldn't see how I was going to get whatever it

was I wanted that was going to satisfy me, that was going to make me
feel contented, with the things around me … It had to be some sort of
spiritual solution, something that would give me… would calm me
down, that would give me a reason to continue with what I was doing.
Give a point to my life, perhaps.'

For Andrew, the motivation is somewhat different. Andrew became quite heavily involved in drugs during his university days in the early 1970s. While this period was part of the 'Seeking something', this seeking was in vain, and led, directly or indirectly, to serious health issues. During a stay in hospital for an inexplicable period of paralysis from the neck down, Andrew read books on Buddhism, and once his movement was restored, he saw a poster on the library wall and thought: 'This is it'. The poster advertised a Zen group, which he joined immediately and has remained with ever since.

Seeking

The 'Seeking' code was critical to understanding how the three participants became involved in their Buddhist practices, and this theme was considered from the very beginning, as not only is there much anecdotal evidence that people who come to Buddhism do so after a period of seeking a solution to their suffering, but I knew from very early on that many of the models of conversion to religious groups included the conception of the potential recruit as a 'seeker' after truth.

After leaving college and working in a job unrelated to his studies for some years, John found himself unhappy and dissatisfied with 'the material side of life'. As mentioned earlier, it was obvious to him that a spiritual answer was needed to his problems, and he told me that he had initially reconsidered Christianity, though this didn't seem to offer the answers. It was shortly after this that he first encountered a book on Buddhism that seemed to be more appealing. Initially, though, John's search led him wanting to run away, to 'escape'. At the low point of his unhappiness, he

[John] ' thought of just walking out on my life as I led it, literally just
walking out the door, going off and just starting life over somewhere
else. Like some people do, you know?... I expected to be up in the

*Scottish hills somewhere! [Laughs.] Or in Japan or something. That's
what I saw as the future being.'*

Andrew's search was for more than just a nebulous 'something' – it was a
practice that he was seeking, 'something you can do every day', in opposition to the
Christian tradition that he knew from childhood, which seemed only to affect people
for one day of the week.

*[Andrew] 'but, what do people do, though? All the time, for thirteen
years it was nagging me, what do people do? There must be something
that people practice … It's always nagged me that there must be
something you can do every day'*

In contrast, Richard sees his route to Buddhism in different terms entirely. He
even denies that there was an active 'seeking' on his part:

*[Richard] ' It was not like a goal-directed search or so, I didn't feel
that there was a gap in my life, I was not looking for meaning or so. I
think I had the meaning.*

However a search of a sort was indeed going on – though on different terms to
John's quest for spirituality. Richard was searching for a way to actualise his altruistic
predispositions:

*[Richard] 'I had the feeling life becomes meaningful or important or
valuable or so when you really engage doing something for others. But
somehow this was driving me.'*

Encountering Buddhism

The first encounters with Buddhism for all of the participants proved very
important, but difficult at first to understand. There were many sections of the
transcripts at this point that were initially coded under 'The Inexplicable', and only as
the analysis developed did they start to make sense in light of the emerging theory.

As seen in the previous section, John's search for meaning had a religious tone from the beginning, and once he had come across a book in the town library that talked about Zen, he was determined to get involved. The first book he read was *Teach Yourself Zen* by Christmas Humphreys:

> *[John] 'I read that from page one it was like, the way the book spoke, it was like, "Are you having this problem, do you think like this?" you know, and I thought "This book's talking to me, it knows me" or something. And once I'd read that book that was it, you know, I was hooked, and I just read every book I could find on Zen.'*

John soon translated his interest in these books to a practical search to find a group of meditators that he could practice with, having tried to meditate at home on his own. John's first impressions of the Zen group were important, and it as at this stage that I started to note an element of 'recognition' in John's narrative, that I initially coded as 'Inexplicable':

> *[John] 'I expected it to be a very Westernised version of Zen, just a room that people sat in, nobody wore any particular clothes, just loose comfortable clothing and we'd just do meditation and that was it, and it was when I came and I saw this dojo and people wearing kimonos, rakasus[1] and everything, and I thought, "God, these people are the real thing, these people are really sort of serious here," and I thought this was it, this was for me.'*

For Andrew, the flavour of the first contact with Buddhism, in the form of Alan Watts' *The Way of Zen*, was one of fascination: 'it drove me crazy, because it was complete nonsense, absolute Non Sense. A very frustrating book, but there was something there in it that really intrigued me'. This book, together with the *Tao Te Ching*, intrigued Andrew immensely and started the searching for a practice discussed above – though it would be years before anything was to come of it.

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[1] A *rakasu* is a traditional ceremonial garment somewhat resembling a bib. It is made by many Zen students when they take their precepts in a *jukai* ceremony, committing themselves to the practice.

*[Andrew] '[The ideas were] churning away for thirteen years …
returning to stillness, that which cannot be named. What is this, this
absolutely fantastic thing? Every year I used to read it, and read it as I
was going along to work and… but, what do people do, though? All the
time, for thirteen years it was nagging me, what do people do? There
must be something that people practice.*

Years later, Andrew saw a poster in a public library advertising a Zen lecture. His
reaction to seeing the poster was remarkable, and was coded as 'automatic attraction'.

*[Andrew] 'Sixteen years later I see this poster with the word Zen on it
and a picture of somebody.*

Q: 16 years after you came across the Alan Watts book?

*A: Yeah. It was, just, incredible, it just rattled through me, "This is
what I want to do", just this picture of this guy sitting and I thought,
"Ah, maybe this is something, this guy sitting there, with this beautiful
posture, sitting in this posture".'*

Actually, it is quite possible that this was not exactly what he thought on seeing
the poster – Andrew here is employing a distinctive discourse of his tradition, which
emphasises the meditative posture very strongly. While anyone might admire
someone's posture, to comment on it in this way is a typical compliment that might be
paid to a meditator in this particular school. Whatever his initial thoughts might have
been, though, when Andrew went along to the meeting, he met his teacher for the first
time, a French Zen Buddhist nun and recognised Zen Master. The character of this
meeting is remarkable:

*[Andrew] 'Then she walked up to me at the end of the introduction and
sort of stood on my foot, and it was like "Have I met you before?" So I
said, "I don't think so," but she just stayed with her one foot on my
foot. And I didn't pull away – she must have done that to see if I would
pull away, but … It was always like I was meant to meet her in some
ways, because she was like, "Have I met you before," she made some*

connection, there was something there, you know, that she … well, there
was some connection.

Here again, while coding for Andrew's first contact with Zen, I was coming across a peculiar quality of his account. Richard's first meeting with his Lama, a Westerner who had studied both in Tibet and Europe, had had a similar distinctive quality, and the suspicion increasingly arose that the experiences had an important role in the participants' subsequent engagement with their respective Buddhist traditions. Richard's mother told him about a talk being given by a Buddhist teacher in his home town, and he attended. He relates:

[Richard] 'I did not really get involved in it. I just went away, and from
this moment his name didn't really leave my mind. It just started to
repeat all the time again. It came up again and again.'

It is clear that this category, this sense of recognition or attraction is of vital importance in understanding the process undergone by the three participants. It is equally clear, though, that there is something decidedly odd about these encounters, and we shall return to this.

Relationships

Given the importance of social and kinship networks in the theoretical work on conversion to date, this category certainly needed attention. However, as the analysis proceeded, it quickly became obvious that the role of the interpersonal worlds of Richard, Andrew and John was certainly not the role that is described in the literature.

Not one of these participants started their involvement in Buddhism because of contact by a representative of the traditions. Indeed, they often had to struggle to find a way to realise their ambitions, having been introduced to Buddhism by books – in the case of Andrew, it was sixteen years before he was able to find a Zen group.

The relationship with the teacher, however, has been important for Andrew and for Richard, both of whom seem to have been favoured students of their teachers. Apart from the dramatic nature of their meetings with their teachers, the student-teacher relationship seems very strong in both cases, yet totally absent in John's case.

Richard was asked by his Lama – on only their second meeting – to start a new group in his home town which it seems was to replace the original group ('he also told me not to rely on the old people from the old group, but to do what I think is right, which gave some freedom'). Further, the Lama asked him to travel to the Ukraine with translators to teach Buddhism there, less than two years after Richard had started to meditate himself.

Andrew's relationship with his teacher seems to be the strongest – perhaps this impression might be slightly exaggerated as she had died some years back. Andrew was even asked to witness his teacher's Will, and attended to her while she was in hospital ('Even lying in her bed, during chemotherapy, she was giving me her teaching', he relates).

Having been paralysed for some time, when Andrew started meditating he was in a lot of pain. He was able to 'stick it out' for six years because of his teacher's support:

> [Andrew] 'I just sat … she used to come up every month so we'd have a zazen day every month, and she'd push and push and push, she'd push me further and push me further, and there seemed to be zazens that went on forever … I think the second zazen day I did I came out and burst into tears … she came to me and said, "Andrew, I cried for two years – it'll pass." That's what she said to me:"It'll pass." So I thought, "OK, all right, then I'll put up with it." But it went on for about six years, I think, something like that.

One noteworthy incident was Andrew's seemingly telepathic knowledge of his teacher's death, and it is worth relating the incident in full:

> [Andrew] 'So she died in '92. I actually rang her up at the moment she was dying which was very strange.
>
> Q: Really?
>
> A: Yeah, on the Saturday. I just sat up, and I thought, I've got to ring up, there's something not right. And I rang up, and somebody said, "Oh, [Name] is OK, she's having a bit of difficulty." And then the next

morning, somebody rang up and said [Name] had died, and I thought it was the Sunday morning that she had died. It wasn't until after that I found out that it was actually the day before, it was when I had rung up, that she had died. Somebody else in [City] had also tried to ring at the same time!'

It's hard to tell what interpretation Andrew puts on this incident. He calls it 'strange' rather than miraculous, paranormal or even coincidental, and doesn't seem to be claiming any particular power or closeness to his teacher. Yet this synchronistic incident seems to set a tone for Andrew's narration of their relationship, and giving it a mythical or mystical quality.

Engaging Buddhism

All of the participants were chosen because of their demonstrable commitment to their practice. Each has meditated for at least five years, and during that time they have, of course, matured as people and as practitioners of their particular traditions. I asked each of them whether they had undergone formal membership rituals, and all had. All three had taken the 'Bodhisattva Vow' and 'taken refuge in the three jewels' in special membership ceremonies (this latter is to acknowledge the Buddha, the *dharma* or Buddhist teaching, and the *sangha* or Buddhist community) and, in addition, Andrew has taken the more extensive vows of a Buddhist monk (though he lives as a layman, as do most monks and nuns of his sect). Both Andrew and Richard have also taken on teaching roles in their organisations, further evidence, were it needed, of their full engagement with their traditions.

Critically, none of the participants seemed to waver or vacillate about the decision at all, making the ritual commitment eagerly:

[John:] 'the bodhisattva vow is like a commitment to continue to practice … So, yeah, it just seemed like the right thing to do. I didn't really debate it at all in my mind, I just felt like I wanted to do it.'

[Andrew:] 'I rang my teacher up and I said, "I'd like to ask to be ordained a monk." I'd only been ordained a bodhisattva a year, so she

says, "Why do you want to be a monk?" And I said, "Well, it just seems inevitable. I just really think I'm going to be a monk, that's what I'm going to do." So she says, "That's exactly what you should answer!"'

[Richard:] 'When you become Buddhist, you take something like the Refuge … And this of course I did in the beginning … It was really a conscious decision that this is the right thing for me, and I want to somehow commit myself to it'

John specifically says that Zen is 'the most important thing in my life', and is struggling at the moment to integrate more Zen into his life:

[John:] 'it's trying now to bring more of the one into the other, more practice into my daily life. It's the most difficult part, I think, because at times I do things and say things, and I think that as somebody that practices Zen I'm thinking in a totally different way than I do when I go on a sesshin or when I'm at the dojo, I'm perhaps less considerate of people, or more critical of people, sometimes less understanding … of people.'

He is even considering moving from full-time to part-time employment in order to spend more time 'on his bum', meditating.

The impact that Buddhism has made on all three is obvious, and obviously far-reaching, but it was differentiated in the coding from the text that was more specifically about the effects of the practice on the participants, which is detailed in the next section.

The Inexplicable

Almost from the very start of the analysis, some of the codes generated were very surprising in their content, and seemed to refer less to psychological processes or social structures than to something altogether more mysterious. Early on in the analysis, however, possible meanings or implications were unclear, so I coded them with titles such as 'Déjà vu' and 'The Inexplicable' and left them alone.

Further analysis at the category level and the theory-building level has clarified some of this material, and played a crucial role in allowing a theoretical process to emerge from these data. This category was reflected mainly in the transcripts of Andrew and Richard. For John, the only instance of the sort of material gathered here was after he first picked up a book on Buddhism:

> [John:] ' I read that from page one it was like, the way the book spoke, it was like, "Are you having this problem, do you think like this" you know, and I thought "This book's talking to me, it knows me" or something.'

Here is the element of recognition, or 'automatic attraction' that is much more strongly marked in the other participants' interviews. Andrew's comment (quoted above) on first seeing the poster that was advertising a Zen group, can be interpreted in this light. Richard addresses the issue more explicitly:

> [Richard:] 'It's difficult to say, it was just like an automatic attraction, it was not an intellectual thing, when I say it has this aspect and that, but … I was always quite interested in, from the beginning.'

It was on later reflecting on this passage that I first started to suspect what this code might signify – that the attraction to Buddhism was rooted not in any intellectual curiosity, or enmeshment in a socio-cultural world, but that there was a process of matching the potential convert's personality, or cognitive set, to the religion. As we will see, this forms the basis for the major finding of this study.

When Andrew is asked to justify his request to become a monk, he answers that becoming a monk simply feels inevitable to him – and this sense of inevitability is later confirmed, when I asked him what he says to people who ask him why he meditates:

> [Andrew:] 'I suppose mostly, for me, it's inevitable. And having found it, I'm very thankful. I feel very fortunate to have found it, to have got here.'

Alongside inevitability and automatic attraction, the most striking findings of this research have been coded under 'Coming home'. I had interviewed Richard first, and

he talked about the period just before he started sitting with his teacher, when he had gone to India to satisfy his curiosity about the East. He remarks:

> [Richard:] 'This was also quite amazing, because whenever I came to a monastery, it was just like coming home. It was just … I knew the places, I had the feeling I know everything, it's just like coming to the living room of your parents or so, where you grew up somewhere. I couldn't name that this is that, and so on, but somehow I feel a sense of … totally at home, I would say … Yeah, and this was somehow the starting point.'

I felt this might be important, but was unsure of how to proceed with this – after all, Richard himself frames his explanation for this feeling in terms of reincarnation:

> [Richard:] 'To be honest, now I think I just took up the thread from a previous life. I just met it again, and just went on naturally. It was nothing new, it was just meeting something that I knew again.'

Being somewhat unconvinced about reincarnation, I initially filed these incidents in an 'Inexplicable' code and forgot them for a time. When I spoke with Andrew, however, I was astonished when he said something very similar:

> [Andrew:] 'I think I felt like this is where I'm going, this is where I'm meant to … Like, when I went to the monastery, the first time I walked into the monastery, I mean I hadn't been there before, and I walked into these buildings and these people, and I felt like I was coming home.'

Additionally, the character of the meeting between Andrew and Richard and their teachers, which was reported earlier, had this same element of recognition.

Theory building and modelling

As the axial categories started to emerge, the general pattern of the conversion process *as evidenced by these three individuals* started to become clear. All three participants came from homes where there was a religious influence, but that influence was either weak or undermined by the family. It could be that a necessary pre-

condition for the potential convert to define himself as a seeker in religious terms is that there is an element of religious discourse in early childhood.

All three of the interviewees, though, also evidenced some kind of non-traditional religious thinking in their childhood. Andrew identified a hypocrisy around the exoteric traditions of the church when he wondered about 'the face of religion, putting your Sunday best on and being on your best behaviour once a week didn't seem right'.

All three participants also had what I have termed a 'religious latency' period in their lives, roughly coinciding with their teen years, a period when one might think people were particularly open to religious influences. After this, however, the pattern starts to get slightly less clear.

Crucially, we can conceive of the sense of 'coming home' or of 'automatic attraction' that was reported and coded as evidence of a '*test for fit*' between the potential convert and the religion that they have encountered. The encounter between convert and religion becomes not a chance affair, but a meeting of an individual (with their own personality, cognitive style, prejudices, expectations) and a religion (with its own characteristics, presented either in a medium such as books or by meeting a member of that religion who explains it). This is the key finding of this study, and simplifies understanding greatly. Essential features of the conversion process, grounded in the experience of Richard, John and Andrew are represented graphically in Figure 2.
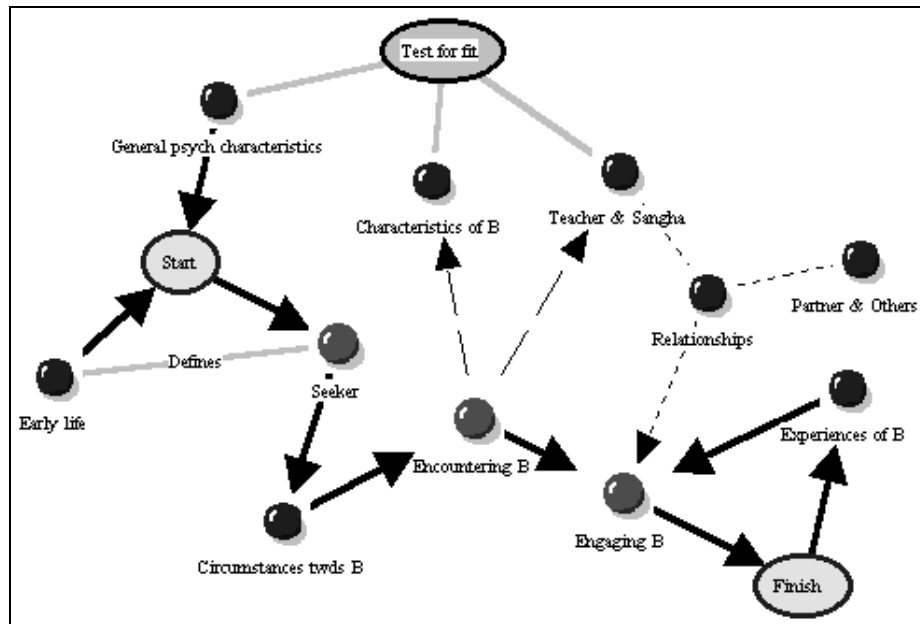
Figure 2. Development of grounded theory in NVivo modeller

There are several points to note:

1. The definition of oneself as a seeker is reliant on the presence of some form of religious socialisation in early life. For many people, this self-definition may simply not be available.

2. At the point of the encounter with Buddhism, there is a 'Test for Fit' between the religion and the potential convert. This test for fit compares the 'General Psychological Characteristics' of the individual with the 'Characteristics of Buddhism' and possibly also involve characteristics of the teacher and community.

3. If the conditions of this test are met, the individual can then engage with the religion, and once this engagement has been made, we can safely say that conversion has occurred – though we cannot precisely say exactly when this happened. Continued engagement is reliant on the adaptation of the social surroundings of the convert.

4. There is no 'end point' – engagement with the religion is a continuous and dynamic feature of one's life and the issues that characterised the conversion may continue to be important to the convert.

Discussion

After examining the data collected from three committed Buddhists, a model of religious conversion has emerged from the data that centres around a 'Test for Fit' between the potential convert and the religion in question.

In terms of this model, *religious conversion is the product of a successful perceived match between the individual and a given religion* and/or the social context of that religion – this latter emphasis being at the core of Pitt's (1991) earlier model. A successful match may exist prior to the actual encounter with the new religion, so that the 'search' for an encounter may go on for some time. Further, there cannot be identified an exact time that the conversion happens; for some people, the conversion happens long before the first encounter between them and the religion. In these cases, the eventual encounter – the resolution of the individual's search – carries with it an emotional quality of 'homecoming'.

To situate the accounts of the participants in the framework of conversion theory, and taking Rambo's (1998) criteria as the benchmark of the current state of the art in conversion theory, we can show evidence of his four factors of kinship networks, relationships, a change in discourse and a change in the convert's role or identity.

Rambo's emphasis on conversion being facilitated through kinship networks is not strongly supported by the data from this study, though he did specifically state that 'sometimes' impersonal methods of communication give access to religions. Relationships certainly play a part in our participants' engagement with Buddhism, but perhaps not as Rambo might have expected. While Andrew and Richard both have strong links with their teachers, for John relationships with either a teacher or others in the tradition do not seem to be nearly as important – though of course such relationships do exist (Andrew has been leading the group in their city for as long as John has been meditating).

Given the cross-sectional nature of the data collection, it is hard to prove that there has been a change in discourse over time, though all participants' transcriptions are littered with phrases that suggest that just such a change has taken place – for instance, Andrew's comment observed earlier about the posture of the Zen Master on a

poster. Finally, a change in role or identity is evident in all participants – even in John, who denies being 'a Buddhist', but who reports that 'I feel like somebody that practices Zen'.

If one takes the perspective of Lofland and Skonovd's (1981) 'conversion motifs', again the accounts seem to fit, most comfortably with their 'intellectual motif'. Harrington (2000) summarises this as where:

> *'The querant starts with private research which leads to "illumination rather than ecstasy", and a relatively high level of belief occurs before participation in organised activity and ritual.'* (para. 7)

However, the fit is not perfect, and it is Harrington's own proposal for a seventh motif that best fits the bill here. Her 'recognition' motif, developed from a study of conversion to Wicca, is strikingly similar to elements revealed in the 'The Inexplicable' code in the analysis. Harrington observes that 'the "recognition" motif is one which may only be relevant to minority religions such as Wicca' (para. 39), and concludes her paper by writing:

> *'One outstanding finding was evident throughout this study: that whatever social and psychological processes may be coming into play – Wiccans do not convert, they come home.* (para. 57, emphasis added)

The resonance between this and the data from the three Buddhists is obvious, but Harrington unfortunately stops short of attempting to cast light on the psychological processes of her Wiccan converts – it would be interesting to see if the experience of 'coming home' for Wiccans has the same element of 'Test of Fit' evidenced by Andrew, Richard and John.

The theory generated by this study also has implications for a re-evaluation of Pitt's (1991) balance theoretical model. Overall, there is a very high level of agreement between this grounded theory and Pitt's model – both describe a process in which the individual and the new religion interact. In both models, there is an imbalance between the potential convert and religious socialisation leading to a self-identification as a 'seeker', though in the current model, emphasis is placed on the pre-existence of a

religious discourse in which the potential convert can frame their identity as a religious seeker.

However, the data gathered here highlight an important shortcoming of Pitt's model. For Pitt, the critical moment of conversion seems solely to involve whether or not the seeker can form positive affective bonds with members of the new religion. While this acknowledges the role of interpersonal relations in forming the psychological world of the convert, it does not allow for an *authentic engagement* with the new religion in the terms of that religion, or for the possibility of the religion or conversion process as an agent of spiritual transformation. In this study, while affective bonds are not absent, they seem (for John especially) to only be of peripheral importance. However, John is *radically* transformed – he uses the word himself – by his encounter with Zen, but not through the establishment of social networks, and Pitt's theory must be revised in order to take this into account. This is far closer to transformation as understood by transpersonal and existential psychologies than a mere 'change of discourse' or 'social assimilation'.

For Richard and Andrew, the interpersonal element was important – but specifically with regard to their teachers rather than other members of the religious group. While an initial reading of the data might suggest that this amounts to the same thing, the character of the initial meetings for both of these is remarkable. For Andrew, as we have seen, the meeting was more dramatic, and the bond between teacher and pupil instant. However, one suspects that this is not the sort of affective bond that Pitt had in mind! It is far more suggestive of the 'homecoming' or 'déja vu' theme that, as already discussed, marks the 'Test for Fit' between the pre-existing mind set of the individual and the pre-defined parameters of the new religion.

Pitt's proposed social mechanism, though, cannot simply be removed from the model, as it does explain some conversion experiences, perhaps even the majority, outside of this realm of study. For instance, conversions that occur under the experimental, affectional or revivalist motifs of Lofland and Skonovd (1981) might very well rely heavily on this mechanism. So where does Pitt's model hold and where might it need expanding?

Logically and symbolically, at the point of the first imbalance, the scenario of disagreement with the socialisation holds good: [(p~Lx) + (pUx)], the 'normal' imbalanced state of things prior to conversion. When the seeker encounters the new religion, though, an alternative to simple re-socialisation is needed. This step would be the 'Test for Fit' (see Figure 3). Prior to the test, the situation could be expressed as [(pLz) + (p~Uz)], where the individual has a positive attitude to the new religion, even though he has not yet come into contact with it. When contact is made with any new religion, the test is implicit in that encounter, and can be solved either by [p=z], where the individual and the religion match, or by the opposite, [p≠z]. The positive outcome of this, for our participants, gives rise to the sense of recognition, and the experience of this 'fit' might account for the sense of 'homecoming' and déja vu.
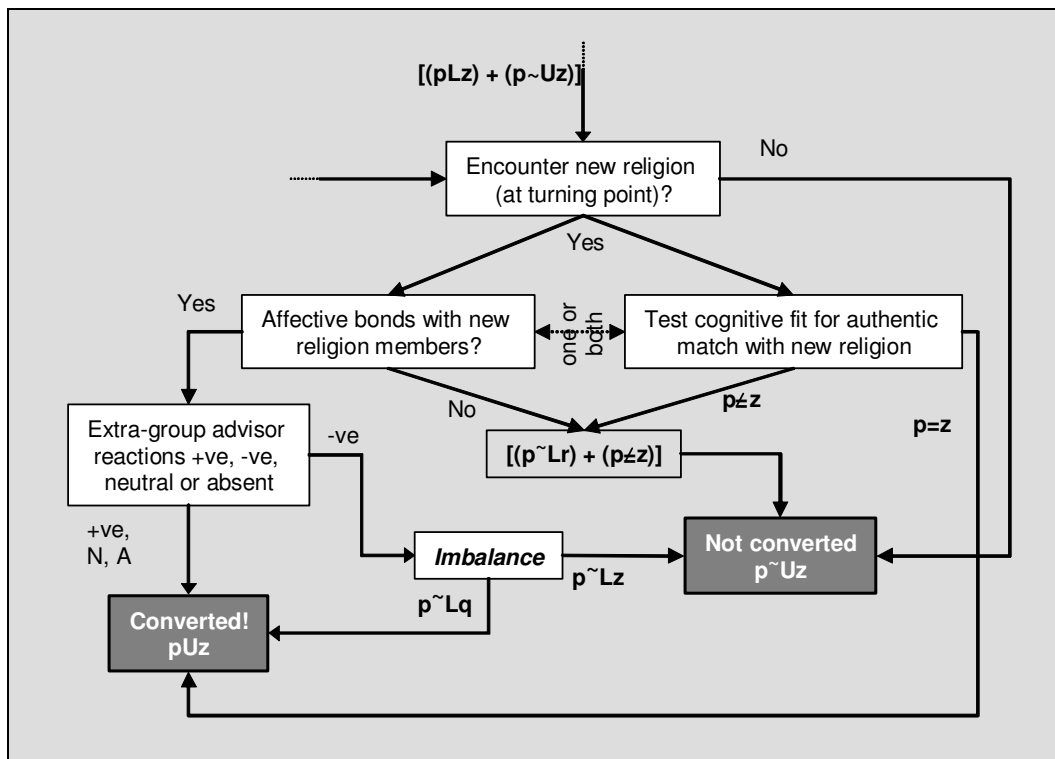

Figure 3: Revised Balance Theoretical Model (after Pitt 1991)

p = potential convert, z = new religion, q = extra-group advisors,

r = members of new religion, L = positive attitude, ~L = negative attitude, U = union

While Pitt claims that his model answers Strauss's charge that conversion theory is limited in seeing conversion as something that 'happens to the individual' (cited in Pitt, 1991, p. 182), it is hard to fully agree with him on this point. The inclusion of a

'Test of Fit' gives a far more potent role to the potential convert without over-simplifying this as a cold, rational choice, and allows us to explain not only conversion but instances where conversion does *not* happen, or where conversion only happens after encounters with several different religions.

Pitt writes that 'this model of religious conversion is still incomplete' (1991, p. 181), leaving the way open for others to modify his tentative structure. The present grounded theory study allows us to start suggesting such modifications with a degree of confidence, rooted as they are in the empirical evidence provided by Richard, Andrew and John.

The purposive sampling strategy adopted by this study was designed to address concerns about the generalizability of the findings that might arise from the inclusion of only three participants. However, such a small sample by definition must be tightly focused, and more work needs to be done to both confirm and expand on the findings here. For instance, all of the participants had made clear commitments to their Buddhist practice, and we know from a study of the demographics of the 'new Buddhism' that decisions around identifying Buddhists are not this simple. Furthermore, all participants in this study were male and another important avenue for future research is the question of whether the pattern of conversion for female converts might differ from that found for males.

The current study proposes a modification to Pitt's model of conversion, but perhaps asks as many questions as it answers. A next step might involve a survey of members of Buddhist and other minority religions to investigate how wide-spread the element of 'homecoming' (and therefore fitness testing) is among these groups. Verification of the importance of this element would be crucial, and if it were established to be a significant factor, it would be vital to then consider what the specific parameters of the 'Test for Fit' might include, and what degree of fit is necessary for a successful conversion.

Further, it would seem that the first phase of Pitt's model could be further investigated, as there were suggestions in the data gathered here that for the individual to define themselves as a religious querant, they need to have been exposed to religious discourse in their early life, and also possibly to have – for some reason – taken a fairly

iconoclastic view of their native religious tradition which is ultimately unsatisfying. It was not possible in this study to tease out much more than this general observation, and Pitt's sketchy handling of this part of the process is also unsatisfactory.

It is clear that contemporary conversion theory needs to adapt to be able to account for the experiences reported by modern converts to minority religions such as the 'new' Buddhism or, as Harrington (2000) suggests, Wicca. Current theory does not adequately account for the experiences of the participants that were involved in this grounded theory study, and it seems clear that if the theory is to remain viable in the current religious milieu, it must be adapted to the evidence gathered.

While there is a need to explore the first stage of Pitt's proposed model of conversion, the most serious flaw in his theory that was highlighted by this study was the inability of the balance approach to deal with 'recognition motif' conversions in a satisfactory manner. This paper proposes an alternative structure for the 'bottom' half of Pitt's model which would take this into account, thereby allowing greater inclusion of conversion cases under this model.

Acknowledgements

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