

I DID IT ALONE - IN PRAYER

A STUDY OF RITUALS AND
CONVERSION ACCOUNTS AMONG
EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS
IN THE GAMBIA, WEST-AFRICA

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"I used to say :

"there is a God-shaped hole in me."

For a long time I stressed the absence, the hole.

Now I find

it is the shape

which has become more important."

Salman Rushdie.

To Aida

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 POINT OF DEPARTURE

The topic of this study is how Christianity becomes meaningful for individuals. I will approach this topic through an analysis of accounts of conversions given to me in interviews, and an analysis of two Church-gatherings in a small evangelical Church in the Gambia, West Africa. What do accounts of conversion convey, in terms of life experience, expectations to life and ways to deal with incidents in life? In what ways do these accounts of conversion relate to ideas, morals and sanctions communicated in the social interaction in the Church-community? And further; could such narratives simply be seen as products of such social processes in the Church?

The Church is called Evangelical Church of the Gambia (ECG) and has only a few hundred members in diverse parts of the country. The Church was started in 1980 by a mission called WEC¹- international, an organisation with which ECG still co-operates closely. Today ECG has 9 different local branches located in different areas of the Gambia. I studied two of them -

¹ WEC= World-wide Evangelisation for Christ

Omega and Bundung Churches - located in Kanifing district, an urban area near the coast. Each of these Churches have approximately 50 members. While most members in Omega are immigrants to the Gambia, there are more Gambian members in Bundung.

In terms of religion, Christians are in minority in the Gambia. Only 4 % of a population of one million people refer to themselves as Christians, while 95 % are Muslims (1993-census). According to statistics, there is no reason to believe that the numbers of Christians are increasing. As such, the topic of this thesis is rather concerned with the exception than the rule.

Reflection on my own reorientation concerning religion

Holtedahl and Altern (1995) requests reflections on how the researchers are situated in relation to the subject of study. Haraway (1991) also argues that the researcher should make it evident in the text not only what point the researcher is looking from, but also their movements toward this point. She argues that complete relativism creates an impression of vision from everywhere and nowhere just as much as positivistic ideals for science (p.193). I take this challenge and will start out with reflecting on my motivations to choose the subject of this study.

When I was 13 years old I experienced something which I conceived as a conversion to Christianity. This experience was highly emotional and visual. However, the words I used to describe this vision also became a part of the experience. Thus, the vision and the emotions were “translated” into a verbal language, and together with my Christian friends the incident was soon described in terms of a conversion-narrative. I believe that this incident could have created another kind of story in another environment. In short, due to this experience, or maybe due to more long lasting processes, my consciousness of the world and my place in it changed. Specially important was the new conception of a relationship with God. This conception, though, was linked to new ideals of creating a fellowship based on values which were different from those of our surrounding society. For me, I think this incident coincided with my opposition to the older generation, which I thought held on to some rules of conduct without being able to explain or reflect on the reason why. I longed for an environment that was interested in, and able to discuss the rules for moral conduct. The irony is that this longing led me to a community with much stricter moral rules than I had experienced before.

I joined a group of Christians in Northern Norway, which might be labelled fundamentalist

evangelicals. Here I finally found adults who spent time trying to create such a frame of reference - with the Bible as supreme authority. My experience was that not only the ideals, but also the actual social rules in the Church-community, differed strongly from the surrounding society. The members' ideals were that their Christianity should influence their conduct in all situations in their lives. We were encouraged to evangelise by words or deeds in every situation. The extent to which this ideal was carried out in practical life was wide, leading to the fact that social rules in other contexts were broken. This created a sort of distance between us and outsiders - we were "different". We then became dependent on the Church-community to gain accept. As I conceived it, the Church-community was characterised by a high degree of social control.

I visited ECG for the first time while on holidays in the Gambia in 1993, and was surprised to find elements in the Church similar to those in the group of Christians I joined in my youth in North Norway. For instance they sang the same songs - only with English text. During the fieldwork this recognition continued. There were striking similarities between the cosmology in the North Norwegian congregation and the one in ECG. Certain traits such as the emphasis on the Bible as an authority or that the Holy Spirit should lead Church Services and lives, could be recognised in both Churches. The question of being a minority was also similar in both cases, although in different contexts, Norway as a highly secularised society, and Gambia as a predominately Muslim society. This is a situation the two Churches handled differently, but both resulted in creating distances to the surrounding society. This thesis will not be a comparative one though. Still my experiences as a member of the group of Christians in Northern Norway have been important, as you will see, in all phases of the study; in framing questions and hypothesis in the project proposal, in contact with my informants and as a point of reference when analysing the data.

The story of my experiences with conversion and a Christian Church-community is written from an agnostic point of view. After long periods with doubts and disagreement with certain practices and attitudes in the Christian milieu, I stopped being a member of it 8 years ago. After moving to another town to study, I found myself sitting in an ecumenical meeting where several attendants prayed that God should protect the American soldiers who were attacking Iraq. Not a word was mentioned about the Iraqi civilians who suffered from the war. As a result I packed

my bag and left the meeting, understanding that there was an ocean of distance between my attitudes and theirs. This concrete issue symbolised for me a gap between my former Christian “brothers and sisters” and me, and I have not labelled myself a Christian since.

When people ask why I am not a Christian anymore, I normally just answer that I “lost my belief in God”. To explain to others the change of attitude towards Christianity in sociological terms, somehow seems irrelevant to me, since the corner stone in a personal Christian belief is most commonly conceived to be the relationship to God – not for instance the other Christians’ political attitudes. Still it is strange to see how this explanation of “loosing the belief” corresponds to the conversion explanation of “being met by God”. Both expressions try to take focus away from individual choice and intention – it is like something just happening to you without you having much to say about it.

I think Stromberg (1993) touches something important when he says that such narratives/ways of explanation make it easier and more acceptable for the self and it’s surroundings that one is really changing during a lifetime. Probably such changes can be threatening, since our relations to others are built on an idea of stability – a personality that is recognisable throughout a lifetime. I think we see the same way of speaking when it comes to love. One is “hit by Cupid’s arrow” or “struck by the lightning of love”, while on the other hand “love disappeared”. Explanations of divorce that focus on practical conflicts can be added, but is seldom the only or most important explanation. Love should be above the practical, as Christianity also should. Gullestad (1996) writes on the focus on individual choice in the “modern” Norway, but finds similar paradoxes, for instance regarding love:

“The notion of choice can be related to notions of passion. Persons who love each other may describe a passion they could not but follow, but at the same time they may also have the feeling of having made a free choice, in the sense that no third persons decided for them” (Gullestad 1996: 23)

How do members of an evangelical Church in an urban area of a small West-African country relate to changes in their life? Do they describe their change of religious affiliation in terms of personal choice or in terms of Gods intervention? Do they reflect upon how their lives turned out the way it did?

My own description of my conversion to Christianity keeps on changing continuously. As a Christian I emphasised that I had experienced God's touch, was "born again" according to the gospel and felt comfortable with my Christian lifestyle. Now I lay emphasis on interpretation, that is to say, I explain what happened as influence from others, opposition-strategy and dependency of the Christian community.

How could I, from this point of view, study people who maybe believe strongly in God's intervention in their lives, and still reach the ideals in anthropology concerning understanding a society on its own terms as put forward by Barth (1972)?

I have found this ideal difficult to realise. Historically anthropology has struggled with ideas of pre-logic ways of thinking (Eriksen 1993:170) and with views of scientific knowledge as more valid than other kinds of knowledge (Evans-Pritchard 1937). I share Winch's (1970) criticism of the above point of view. However, when anthropologists are analysing data, they most commonly uses a different way of thinking than that of our informants.

This thesis will focus attention on both evangelical Christians conceptions of and reflection on their conversions, and how these relate to their attachment to the Church-community. I will not bring into focus whether my informants' are right or not when they focus on God's intervention in their lives. In this way I have a different perspective than that of my informants.

1.2 BACKGROUND

The Gambia

The Gambia lies in West-Africa and is almost encircled by Senegal. According to "1995 Human Development Report" the Gambia is ranked as the thirteenth poorest out of 174 countries, in terms of aspects such as life expectancy, infant mortality, average caloric consumption, access to clean water, illiteracy etc. The economy is based on export of groundnuts. During the last 30 years, tourism has become the second largest export industry. This industry is mainly located along the coast (particularly in Kanifing district) where you find long, white beaches.

Historically the area was included in three different empires which rose in turn between the seventh and the fifteenth century, namely Ghana, Mali and Songhai. Islam was public religion in

the Mali and Songhai Empire. In the thirteenth century, young Mandinka warriors from the Mali Empire joined traders on travels to the area and established small kingdoms that also were maintained after the Mali Empire was overthrown (Simensen 1990:156). The kings lost much power when “Marabouts” (Islam enthusiasts’) attacked the kingdoms in the end of the nineteenth century. The ringleaders of this riot were chased into French Senegal partly with the help of the British (Tomkinson 1987:51f).

In 1444 the Portuguese came to Gambia, but their influence did not last for long. Organised Christian missions were started around 1820, when missionaries opened schools based on Western tradition. The Gambia was a British colony from 1821 to 1963, when internal autonomy was gained. In 1970 the country was declared a republic with David Jawara in the position as president. The country remained a multi-party democracy until the twenty-second of July 1994 coup d’état, when General Jammeh took power and declared himself as head of state (National Poverty alleviation Programme 1996). Elections took place in 1996, and resulted in the continued rule of general Jammeh - now as President of a restored democracy.

Population Statistics

In the whole country of Gambia the population grew from half a million to one million people from 1973 to 1993. Forty-four per cent of these were younger than fifteen years old. The number of people who are not Gambian’ citizens grew from ten to thirteen per cent in the same period. There is no significant statistical difference in the numbers of men and women.

In Kanifing district, where Omega and Bundung Churches are located, the population has increased five folds since 1973 and reached 228 000 persons in 1993. The percentage of immigrants in this area increased from sixteen to twenty from 1973 to 1993. Half of these immigrants are Senegalese. They mainly occupy jobs as watchmen, maids and tailors. The rest of the immigrants are mainly from Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Mauritania and Mali. Immigrants from non-African countries make only 1%.

Impressions of Kanifing District

The settlement in Kanifing district is scattered over a large area. Most of the buildings are one-floor houses made out of bricks. The quality varies: You can find quiet streets where the villas are

surrounded with high brick walls, and where you seldom see the inhabitants except when cars drive in and out of their gate. In these streets gatherings of watchmen drinking “itiah” (a kind of green tea) might be the most visible form of social life. Fajara, where Omega Church and WEC’s headquarters resides, is an area with many such streets. My impression is that the area where mainly inhabited of consuls and other immigrants in well-paid jobs.

Other streets consist of compounds with self-contained flats rented to several families or small single family houses. Such streets are normally teeming with people who spend time on shady spots outside while working or relaxing, because the cooling breeze is preferred compared with their small two-room flats with tin-roofs and no air-conditions. Often you find simple wood-burning stoves for cooking in the backyards of such flats and you also find pit latrines in small outhouses to meet the whole compounds sanitation needs. Goats, sheep, dogs, hens, and not to forget cocks (who claims that cocks only crow in the morning?) is a normal sight in the backyards. Bundung Church resides in such an area.

Electricity supply is not yet available for all inhabitants in the Gambia, and the supplies are very expensive and unstable even for those who have a mains. Therefore some have got private generators in their compounds. Electric equipment such as washing machines, vacuum cleaners and electric ovens - are not common items. Work is done mostly by physical strength, which is one reason many households - even poor families - have a hired maid.

In Gambia, English is the national language, but people learn it mainly in schools. There are various mother tongues: Mandinka, Wollof, Fula, Jola, Serahuli, Serer, Creole/Aku and several other languages. Although many Gambians have not attended school, there are many that speak some English. The kids often shout to white people: “Hello tourist, How do you do? Give me one Dalasi”, followed by laughter, though their parents have told them not to beg. A group of children by the beach seemed to work as beggars, but normally begging is an activity for old or sick people with no other possible source of income. Many people beside those working in hotels and restaurants depend on tourists for their living. On the beach you will find people selling postcards, juice, handicraft, guide-services and less legal services. My experience was that if you turned down a sales-offer, the salesman was immediately ready to offer another article or service - until at last offering diffuse “friendship”. Personal contact with white people can at least give a Gambian’ an invitation letter, to be able to apply for a visa to cross the borders to the

west. The police are guarding the beach to make sure the tourists do not feel bothered by such efforts. Supermarkets and shops are alternative ways of shopping for tourists, where a diverse assortment of goods are presented in an air-conditioned environment. But prices are often higher at the Supermarkets than with salesmen on the beach or at Albert Market, an outside market consisting of small stalls, where bargaining is a part of the trade.

Religious diversity

There are several large Mosques in Kanifing district which are visited most frequently on Fridays, an important prayer day for Muslims. Loudspeakers in every street corner are used to broadcast an Imam's singing prayer in Arabic language, five times a day. Islam is not a State Religion in the Gambia, and the population is not dominated by Islamists. According to Westerlund (1997), Sufism is the strongest force of Islam in West-Africa. Some clothing at Muslim schools remind of the chador² used by Muslim women in Iran. But generally Gambia is full of colourful, fanciful and low-necked woman's clothes which often do not cover calves and arms.

As mentioned already, the population census reveals that in the country as a whole 95% refer to themselves as Muslims, and 4% say they are Christians. This percentage distribution had not changed a lot since the census in 1983. In Kanifing the percentage of Christians has reached 9, a fact that might have to do with the high numbers of immigrants in this district. Those considering themselves as practising "traditional religions" - which is the category the census use for polytheistic, local, oral religions - have decreased since the 1983-census and are now below 1%. These numbers are probably a bit misleading, since it has been reported that a great number of people practise such particularistic local religions and Islam or Catholicism simultaneously.

The historian Simensen (1990:332f) argues that the oral religions south of Sahara - including the Gambia - have similarities: a) The idea that the dead ancestors continues to live on in the spiritual world and help or punish relatives who are still struggling on earth, b) worship of spirits who reside in nature, c) beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery and d) the idea of a distant high-God, as

² Chador: big piece of cloth covering head and body, but leaves the face uncovered. In Iran the Chador could be combined with a veil (Hansen, Henny Harald 1992: *Islams kvinde-slør*, Borgens Forlag, Kjøbenhavn).

a common feature. The accounts of the Azande-people in West Africa made by Evans-Pritchard (1937) and of two ethnic groups in Ethiopia made by Olsen (1995), seem to fit with this description. Breilid (1994:25f) argues that local religion and social life used to be so closely tied together in rural Africa, that everyone who were in contact with traditional way of living also participated in the religious rituals, which could in fact be seen as a social obligation. This close connection could also be the case in urban areas, Breilid writes.

As an example of such blending of tradition, I would like to mention one informant that was not a present member of ECG, but had joined the Church for some years previously. Kebba mixed Islam, traditional religion and rastafari ideology into a functional whole. He was 24 years old at the time of my stay in the Gambia. He is from a poor family, the parents divorced and his mother working as a maid. Kebba has completed secondary school. Right now he has no job. His mother is a Christian, and his father is a Muslim. He neither prays five times a day, nor fasts during the Ramadan (month of fasting), and has not planned to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca. He still believes in Allah, and dresses in traditional clothes on Fridays. During special ceremonies, he could stay up the whole night to pray. These two quotations give us some idea of his way of approaching religion:

“I believe in the Koran! That it is a holy book. But to follow everything is hard. Maybe in the future. For the Muslim religion, I would like to follow all, if I were able to. The Rasta, I don’t think it’s a religion - it’s an ideology - a movement: I pick some parts that I like. I don’t want to trouble with anyone. I stayed with the Christians for 2-3 years, so some of their thinking is also with me. Islam and Christianity are the same (= as good). I just choose to be a Muslim. If my mum died, the Muslim leaders don’t want me to go to the funeral (since the mother is a Christian) - but I will go! Why shouldn’t I? I love my mum.”

“If I had a juju³ of a black cat, I would be invisible. I could even go all the way to Norway without anyone noticing me. Enter the aeroplane without a ticket, and the border without visa. Come on, I could do it!”

³ ju-ju: kind of amulet with roots in traditional religion. It could be made such as to be tied to the body. Muslims often put a piece of paper with quoting from the Koran in it.

The reason Kebba gives for turning to Islam again, is that he think he should follow his fathers religion. This attitude I met on several occasions among Muslims.

Returning to Simensen, he also writes that there were less “conflict” between traditional religion and the sort of Islam that were practised south of Sahara, than it was between traditional religion and Christianity (Simensen 1990:346).

An interview I carried out with a priest in the Roman Catholic Church in Banjul (the Capital of the Gambia), suggests that the Catholic Church are not that much in conflict with “traditional religion”:

“ Two Fathers has gone to other African countries to study. When they come home they are going to work with co-operating parts of traditional religion in the Service and the theology of the Church. I myself have never gone into these matters, but it seems like people go to these traditional religious leaders as soon as they have a problem, and the offers they are supposed to make are sometimes too demanding. Some parts are goodies and some parts are baddies...If I hear that someone in the Church has gone to a traditional religious leader to ask for help, I first go to the person to ask if what I have heard is correct...If I can help the person, I try to do so. It is very seldom that some one stop being a member of the Church because of this, or that we ask them to leave.”

The attitude within WEC seemed to be very different, illustrated by this statement made by the President of WEC in an interview:

“We don’t encourage mixing of traditional religion with Christianity. We make that clear. Wearing ju-ju’s for instance. Some give it up easily. Some are scared, but we try to convince them that they are better off without. If we hear that someone in the Church is using it, we talk with that person. Either they stop it, or they leave the Church. But clapping, drumming and dancing is parts of the African heritage we do take in.”

ECG and the relation with the Mission

As mentioned earlier, ECG was started by WEC-mission in 1980. One of the branches within ECG I studied - Omega Church - was not planned by the mission though. One administrative

worker within WEC told me that: *“Omega Church almost came by accident. It’s not the WEC-missions aim to plan Churches for the foreigners in the Gambia. But we don’t have anything against them either, so it’s fine. I think it’s only two Gambian members there.”* Another WEC-worker advised me not to study Omega at all, but rather another branch of ECG: *“You should go to another branch of ECG. People here are mostly from other countries. The language is only English. And the style is more influenced by the west. I don’t like it too much. It is never good when one tries to imitate.”*

Notwithstanding Omega Church’s meeting room was located right at the WEC-mission’s headquarters, which is sited next to a big mosque in Fajara. A secretarial school ran by the mission is in the same compound, and when school is closed Omega Church uses the building. The building facilities in the compound also contain apartments for three of the WEC-workers besides offices and rooms for visitors, like other WEC-workers on leave from their positions upcountry. Some of the members of Omega lived close to the Church, others a bit farther away. The same goes for the members in Bundung Church, who otherwise had their own Church-building in the middle of a lively residential area.

When it comes to the formal organisation, there is the president and vice-president of the whole of ECG. They meet with the pastors of the local branches, and two representatives from WEC in the **Church-council**. There are also **area-councils** where pastors in an area meet. In each local branch you will find a pastor and an assistant pastor. They discuss issues regarding the local Church with a few of the members who are appointed as “elders”.

A WEC-worker said the mission’s seats in the council are just advisory. He thinks the mission does not have great influence on the ECG. *“We try to leave the decision-making to the Africans”*, he says, and further. *“In time our goal is that everything should be taken over by the Gambians. That is the way we work. We plant a Church, stay with it until maturity and then move on to a different place. The Gambia is full of places that has no witnesses”*. Each missionary attaches himself or herself to a particular local branch of ECG. Considering WEC’s seats in ECG’s Church Council, the fact that the mission occasionally gives the Church economical gifts, and the personal contact WEC-missionaries have with members of ECG, give enough grounds to conclude that WEC is the main international organisation the Church is connected to.

According to a WEC-worker, WEC is a mission that is not affiliated to a particular Church. It recruits personnel both from Anglican and Baptist Churches among others. Those I met were from Canada, Germany, Scotland, and Japan. The mission has special training schools in Europe that prospective missionaries have to attend before they start working as missionaries within WEC. WEC is running five clinics/health centres and a technology training centre upcountry besides adult literacy work. For security reasons, I am told, all properties belong to ECG on paper. If the political situation forces all the missionaries to go back, the buildings will at least be left to the Church.

“There is nothing called a religious visa in the Gambia”, a medical worker within WEC explained to me; all WEC-workers have visas on social grounds. The same applies to the mission. As an organisation it has to report medical, educational and other developing results to the government every year, in order to get support.

I am convinced that the mission’s aim is primarily religious. The medical worker stated that the clinic has not only Christian Gambian staff, but that they prefer Christians because they would probably sympathise more with the patients. I also heard that some young women who attended the secretarial school had converted. The missionaries became very happy because of this and asked the Church-members to help them increase their knowledge about the Bible.

It is important to point out that the relationship between WEC and ECG has not only been harmonious. The President of ECG says that one missionary reacted to clapping in the Church. As a result the President says; *“we want to make these things clear now. We want order, that everything could be decent”*, hinting that there are plans to write down Church-doctrines for the first time in ECG’s history.

Evangelicalism in history

Let us take a glance at how religious science trace evangelicalism historically. According to Eliade’s “Encyclopedia of Religion” (Eliade 1987), evangelicalism’s theological doctrines reflects Reformation teachings. Puritanism and Pietism were marked by parallel trends during the seventeenth century, and blended together in mid-eighteenth century in for instance John Wesley’s Methodist movement. Several other awakenings and renewals appeared during the eighteenth and nineteenth century which contributed to making evangelicalism widespread in

English speaking countries.

In Great Britain evangelicalism grew to be the most typical form of Protestantism by mid-nineteenth century. At the same point of time, “evangelicalism” and “Protestantism” were almost synonymous in America, due to the notable impact and multitude of evangelical congregations. Here Eliade thinks evangelicalism brought together parts of Puritanism, Pietism, Presbyterianism, Baptism, Calvinism and Methodism. Conversion experiences were emphasised, revivals and missions promoted, and the Church was viewed as a voluntary association of believers founded on the Bible alone (Eliade 1987:191).

Early twentieth century, relativistic and liberal views grew within the evangelical Churches, influenced by Darwin and ideas of truth as something that had changed during evolution. These views led to a split in the evangelical congregations, between modernists and traditionalists. Evangelical fundamentalism came to be the traditional reaction to these modernist trends. After World War II, the evangelist Billy Graham promoted evangelical fundamentalism in an effective way, arranging crusades in several countries. Missionary efforts had already planted evangelical Churches in most countries in the world. Graham-sympathisers arranged world Congresses in Berlin 1966 and in Lausanne 1974, which gathered participants from 150 countries (Eliade 1987:194).

Eliade points to three typical traits in congregations who define themselves as evangelical. The first trait is that the Bible is emphasised as an authority. The second trait is that emphasis is on being “born again” to gain eternal salvation, involving personal trust in Christ. The third is emphasis on a spiritually transformed life marked by moral conduct, personal devotion and zeal for evangelism (Eliade 1987:190).

When focusing on the preaching only, the description made by Eliade seems to fit to ECG. However, as I will point out throughout the thesis, there are individual variations with regard to the way ECG-members relate to the Bible, how they conceive their conversion and to what degree they report that the conversion transformed their lives.

2. THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Like many anthropologists I had less opportunity to do pre-projects in the field of study. As a result, I had to change my initial or planned intentions for the study after having visited the field. I regard description of such processes as important in order to contextualise the knowledge produced. Instead of just constructing new problem descriptions and premises for the study, ignoring the process that made this necessary, I have thus chosen to describe the steps in this process. First I will recollect the research “design” I made in the project proposal. Then I will report from the fieldwork. In the end I will discuss why I decided to change focus.

2.1 THE PROJECT PROPOSAL

In my project-proposal I set out to study how each member of ECG experienced the connection between the Church-membership and the social relations outside the Church community. I asked myself whether different sets of thought, expectations and demands created identity-dilemmas or whether the Church-membership were conceived as a resource in terms of handling life in general. If so, what strategies of identity management evolved and in what way did the Church

relate to these strategies?

I expected to find that a tight connection between social life and what is commonly called "traditional religions" made one area of role-dilemma for the Christians. Further I assumed that the Mission (WEC) served as "cultural imperialists" to the Christians in the way that the missionaries from the West interpreted the Bible according to Western Christian traditions.

By the term "resource" I conceived material or social benefits in terms of for instance economical gains and network connection I assumed contact with WEC-mission and ECG implied. In addition I conceived "resource" as thoughts and emotions that the individual reckoned with as improvements for them personally. Such emotions could be harmony, peace in mind or trust in God.

To suggest answers to these questions, I planned to follow a few members in various daily activities to see how they alternated between roles, and their reaction when dilemmas occurred. I planned to make informal interviews to examine how each member expressed the importance they attached to their faith and membership, verbally. I wanted to understand the role Christianity played in relation to both Christian and non-Christian friends, neighbours and relatives. I also wanted to understand how the attachment to the Church was communicated symbolically and how much time the Christians used to participate in Church activities.

In addition I thought it would be important to find out if certain traits were over-represented among the members, such as a particular ethnicity, sex, educational level or rank. Based on previous research (Kipp 1995, Olsen 1995), I assumed that if such traits were found they would give clues of how the Church was seen as a resource to members as compared to their previous lives.

A discussion on what could be reckoned as a resource would have to be based on ideas of what needs an individual has. Was it the researcher's presumptions on the informants' needs I planned to base my analyses on, or the informant's own verbalisation of such needs? I think I implicitly

operated with common ideas on needs, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs⁴.

Neither did I in the project proposal really discuss the relationship between kinds of data and what this data offered information about. However, the fact that I wanted data in addition to the interviews were due to an idea that people might idealise, lie, hide or not be conscious about certain matters. This research design was based on the view that I needed to compare what people **said** with what people **did**, and also with structural features such as **statistics**. Through the fieldwork and writing process I came to see this differently. I will come back to this "shift" after describing my stay in the Gambia.

2.2 DOING FIELDWORK

The diffuse concept "Fieldwork" is the term often used to describe the period of time when Anthropologists stay in communities they want to study, interact with people living in these communities, interview them or in other ways try to understand parts of people's lives in a certain context. My fieldwork lasted from January to June 1996, when I stayed in the coastal area of the Gambia. In order to reduce the mystical image of fieldwork, I will describe quite concretely how I spent this period of time.

My then four years old daughter was staying with me during the fieldwork. The first weeks we stayed with some relatives of my daughter (her father is a Gambian). We enjoyed ourselves, but she would not eat the delicious hot peppered stews, which was prepared for dinner in the compound. I needed a kitchen of my own to prepare food for her, so I decided to try to find a flat to rent. I found one in Fajara where the standard of housing was quite high. My flat was not big though, but it had electricity, a bathtub and a water closet, facilities which made life comfortable for the two Norwegians.

My daughter attended a kindergarten which had an English-speaking teacher. Luckily she learned English quite quickly, but she was shocked by the fact that children in the kindergarten could be given physical punishment. I urged the teacher not to punish her in that way, and made it clear that I would take her out of the kindergarten if I noticed that she had been punished after

⁴ Physiological needs (food, water, sex, shelter), followed by (in ranked order); safety and security needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs and self-actualization needs (Roediger, H.L; Rushton, J.P; Capaldi, E.D.; Paris, S.G. 1987: *Psychology*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston).

all. After a while my daughter got used to playing with the other kids, and seemed to enjoy herself. This gave me some hours during daytime when I was not directly responsible for taking care of her.

Notwithstanding, the first six weeks were used to find ways to cope with everyday life. I was occupied with questions such as where to buy food and what dishes that was possible to cook on a small gas stove. I hang up mosquito nets in the flat and tried to find the reason for that strange electrical chocks I got when using the kitchen-tap (currant leakage) etc. I could not wash all our laundry by hand, and as a result I had to find someone who could be paid to do it. I had to ignore my own barriers against having a maid. Last, but not least, I spent time quarrelling with my neighbours about how our jointly hired watchman was treated. I was really shocked to see the big gaps between the rich and the poor, not to mention the horrifying employment contracts (verbal agreements) watchmen and maids had. When trying to side with the watchman in conflicts with the other employers, I rather made his situation worse, since he was then accused of complaining to an “outsider”. In the end he left the job, and the subsequent watchmen where changed faster than I could follow and served as no security in my view.

I refused to accept that I was treated like a rich person just because of my colour, trained myself in bargaining, and learned short phrases in Wollof in order be able to communicate a different status than the “tourist-with-lots-of-money” one. I succeeded to some extent in this and also felt very welcomed by my daughter’s family. Still, a sneaking feeling of insecurity came over me when a man in the neighbourhood was caught in committing armed robbery. I also got scared when a type of reptile I had never seen before visited my flat. Luckily, a young uncle of my daughter accepted to come and stay with us. He kept me company, helped me to find my ways in a foreign community and served as baby-sitter when I attended meetings or interviews in the weekends or evenings. Had I not found a person who helped me satisfy these needs, things could have been more difficult for me during the months that followed.

The data I did not get

I have tried to describe how time-consuming the struggle to adapt to a new community was. This fact of course influenced my ability to do the kind of fieldwork I had planned. For instance I found it difficult to gain data on the members’ relations to their family, neighbours and work-

mates. The time was too short to follow them in their various daily lives, neither did I get so close to them that such an intensive participation in their lives would feel natural. (I was brought up to respect people's private-life.)

Moreover my data does not include membership statistics, which I had planned to have access to in order to check if any membership-traits were over-represented. When I left Gambia, the Church leadership was in the process of registering members and preparing membership statistics. I have not received any copy of that work from them. For this reason I do not have statistics of the members education-level, ethnicity, and language skill etceteras. However I got many statements about such over-representation of membership traits in Omega that indicated that only two of the members were Gambians. The rest were immigrants' from different West-African countries. I think that this overrepresentation of membership-traits do not give a clue as to how the Church-membership served as a social or material resource to members compared to their previous lives. In simple terms this is due to practical reasons; the language used in the Service in Omega were English, while in Bundung translations were made between English and Wollof or Mandinka. The immigrants knew English, but not necessarily Wollof or Mandinka, and thus felt that it was too boring to listen to the translations. On the other hand, most Gambians know Wollof or Mandinka and few speak English very well, so for them there was no reason to choose a Church where only English were used in the Service. Although this clustering also implies gathering people in similar life-situations, I do not think the basic mechanisms whereby the Church-community functioned were very different between Omega and Bundung. At least I was not able to notice such a difference.

Participation

When I planned my project, I wrote a letter to the leader of the mission to ask for permission to do research among the Church-members. The answer was negative. Lack of time was given as the reason. After a phone-call I was advised to contact the leader of the Church, and so I did. When I arrived, I met with the president of ECG, who is also the pastor of Omega branch. What I thought would be a meeting to clarify my project and create a feeling of trust towards me as a researcher, turned out to be the first interview I carried out. The way was already paved. He had nothing against my project, and claimed eagerly that he wanted openness about every matter. He was also eager to evangelise towards me. I presented myself already in the introductory letter as

a former Christian, who did not believe in God anymore. Several statements during my stay from different persons convinced me that an important reason why they accepted me to do research was the opportunity it created to evangelise towards me. *“Maybe when you complete all those interviews, you will change your mind”*, was the missionary leader’s comment.

The activities of ECG were many, and the meetings so frequent that I was not able to join all of them. I chose to take part in the Sunday Services and the Ladies’ meetings. I joined ten Sunday Services, five Ladies’ meetings and an Easter conference lasting for several days. I took notes during the meetings. Before and after the meetings I took part in conversations.

It was hard for me to decide which parts of the Service I should join in an active way. To take part in the communion would not only be wrong for me personally, but would also be disrespectful towards the Church who emphasised that only those in peace with God should participate in that particular ritual. I could not participate in prayers either - it feels strange to pray to someone that you don’t believe exists. Praise-songs could be seen as something similar to prayers, but I decided to consider it as an object in itself rather than a communication effort with God, that is we often sing just for the joy of singing, not because we agree with the philosophy of the texts. Maybe I just needed to be involved in an activity somehow, not to feel bored. Anyway, I joined in singing and clapping. Only once I was met with a comment that indicated that the person in question interpreted my way of participating in the Service as openness to the gospel.

When I joined the ladies in planning for a “Family Service” I was asked to participate in a mime of a passage from the Bible. I said no, unwilling to participate in such an active way in the Service. The leader for the ladies teased me by saying: *“No, Maria wants to be free to sit and take her notes”*, in an ironical tone. We finally agreed on a very minimal participation from my part: I was to close a door to underline that the five virgins came too late to meet their master.

Evangelisation efforts

The question of my religious standpoint soon came up when talking with the other members as well. I repeatedly presented myself as a person who had been a personal Christian previously, but at this point in life had lost faith in God and had no wish to be a Christian anymore. This was hard for my informants to understand, as they believed that a person, who once had been in

contact with God, would never like to leave Him for good. They saw me either as someone who previously had joined Christian congregations without having any personal contact with God, or as someone who rebelled against God for a period and would later return to him. On several occasions I felt exposed to strong persuasion, and got frustrated because of this behaviour which I conceived as excessive self-confidence and unwillingness to respect a different point of view. At the same time I knew that the aim of such evangelising, in their perspective, was the best - eternal salvation and peace with God. I remembered that I myself once spoke in the same way.

At the Easter-conference up-country, the evangelising efforts came to me in an unexpected manner. The pastor of Omega, Peter, came up to the front, saying that God had put on his heart that he had to pray for someone in particular. He described the person: *“it is someone that once knew God, but now has turned away from him. The person has a very nice personality, but is lost from God...”* Suddenly I knew that he was talking about me - it was not very likely that there were others in ECG’s Easter Conference who were not Christians. One missionary also looked at me briefly while Peter was talking. For a moment I felt the attraction towards a religious way of thinking. What a nice thought it was that God existed and wanted to reach me here in the inland of the Gambia. At the same time I was scared that Peter would ask “the person” to respond in one way or the other. My heart went pit-a-pat for a moment in nervousness and distaste. Meanwhile, I made up my mind that if I should ever become a Christian again, it would not happen in a crowd of people and as a response to a request from a platform. Having thought about this I became calm again and listened to Peter praying for this “person” that the spirit of lies and deception should leave the persons life, and that God should open up the persons eyes so that he/she could see.

After the conference, Peter came to me saying: *“I’m sorry, I just had to do it.”* I replied that it is OK - he should do whatever he felt obligated to. I asked whether he thought I was under influence of evil spirits since I was not a Christian. He said he thought so, in one way or the other.

I think the evangelising efforts towards me helped me learn something about the Omega-members cosmology. Their wish to convince me to convert was probably not far from their efforts to confirm to themselves that their choices were right. At the same time, I think presenting myself as a non-Christian made it possible for individuals to share with me stories of

conflict and frustration, which they did not dare to discuss with members of the Church. However, I was kept away from internal discussions among the leaders in the Church and I was not accepted to join members meetings, where internal affairs were discussed.

Interviews

I carried out two types of interviews: 1) Interviews with the president with ECG, two missionaries and one Catholic priest to learn about how the Church was organised and the attitudes of the leaders and missionaries in relation to issues like “traditional religious practice”, women as pastors, polygamy etceteras, and 2) six interviews/conversations where issues like life, belief and attitudes of members before conversion, the process of conversion, and relationship to the Church and God today were discussed. Only one of these was a real narrative in the sense that the person himself constructed a story that included these issues (Moudou). I did not ask for it, he just started telling me during a visit. I asked if it was okay that I took notes, and he agreed. The five others were interviews where I asked the informants to reflect on the matters mentioned above.

In these interviews I used an interview guide (appendix), but I did not stick to it in a strictly manner. The questions I had prepared were based on my viewpoints about religion, for instance the distinctions: active - passive religious practisers, before - after conversion, and emotions - actions. In many cases I experienced that respondents in answering one question, had also reflected on one or several questions in my list. For this reason I could leave such subsequent questions unasked. They also asked me to clarify when they didn't quite understand where I was heading with my questions. In addition I discovered that I had to elaborate or reformulate some of the questions in different ways in order to make myself understood. Sometimes I also had to repeat the informants' answers or ask about unfamiliar concepts like names of organisations, books or rituals used in Catholic Church or stories about what is called traditional religious practice, to make sure that I got their point. These interviews lasted for several hours, and in one case (Babokar) I also met for a second interview session.

On two occasions I used a tape recorder and transcribed the interviews (Sarah and Mary). During the other three interviews (Omar, Babokar and Melanie) I did my best to write down as exactly as I could what the informants expressed. However, the dialogue to clarify misunderstandings or

unfamiliar concepts was not recorded.

My relationship with the informants

A few of the members I interviewed had become my friends and we visited each other. A couple of the informants, I only knew briefly. My relationship with the persons I interviewed thus varied much! In connection with the presentation of the conversion-narratives, I describe briefly my relationship with each of the persons, in order to contextualise.

Generally I can say that my experiences as a stranger in the Gambia, were of relevance in the sense that the informants I got close to were members in Omega Church and immigrants to the Gambia. They spoke English, were far away from their families as I was, and probably to some extent experienced similar challenges as I did. The two Gambian members of Omega I interviewed and whom I only knew briefly, also spoke English. In this way my group of informants did probably not reflect the variations in types of members within ECG. Meanwhile, these are the kind of processes that “fieldwork” implies. The researcher gets into dialogue with those persons she is able to relate to, and who wishes to engage in such a dialogue. As a result, the researcher are not in a position to **choose** the informants.

The informants’ possibility to “control” the text

When an interview was carried out, I typed out my notes and gave a copy to the informant to enable him/her to correct possible misunderstandings, and also to give the person concerned a chance to react towards a written text about him/her. Few corrections were suggested and the informants seemed comfortable with my presentations of them. However, they have not had the chance to read the contextualised presentation and analyses of the interviews I had with them.

I also wrote to one member, who has university education, to ask if she could read the first draft and make comments. But I do not think the letter reached her – I have not received any reply what so ever.

The reason why I decided to write my thesis in English is that I want to make it accessible for my informants. In addition I have chosen to present parts of the interviews as they were recorded in my field-notes or cassette tape. In order not to loose the oral impression, I have not corrected grammatical errors in these extracts. Due to my own imperfect skills in English grammar, I

might have caused some of these errors myself when taking the notes.

2.3 CHANGING FOCUS

As I have described, I had planned for a fieldwork where I would get different kinds of data that together could highlight the issues of faith and Church-membership as a resource for the members in various ways or as effecting role-dilemmas. I wanted to understand the faith/membership in ECG as a status, a role and a social identity, one identity among several identities each member had. These three concepts point to different aspects of positions in a social structure: status as the aspect of rules, rights, duties and expectations, role as the aspect of actual performance of this status, and social identity as composed of both self-identification and categorisation from others - two aspects that might not be in total conformity with each other. The self-identification concern ranking of one's own identities and an understanding of one's own skills, while categorisation from others concern other people's understanding of your skills and intentions (Rudie 1984:27, my translation of concepts). The main question was about interrelations between the position "evangelical Christian" and other positions the members held.

Rudie also mentions that *"Each of the social fields in which a person participates, implies certain requirements for organisation and certain knowledge. These experiences leave cognitive and emotional "footprints" in the person, and constitute his/her inner map for orientation in new situations"* (Rudie 1984:27, my translation). I became more interested in these "footprints" and how the persons dealt with them, than solely in the positions. In other words, I became interested in how my informants created meaning in their lives. I think my informants not only have "inner maps" but also reflect and relates the various experiences and choices they make - they create narratives of their lives. In more recent work Rudie (1995) has focused particularly on these processes. My new focus is then concerned with what the conversion accounts and observations of Church-gatherings reveal about the ways in which Christianity becomes meaningful for individual members of ECG.

This shift of focus is due to three things (that probably are connected in one way or the other): 1) Difficulties in carrying out the kind of fieldwork I had planned for resulted in difficulties in focusing on interrelations between positions. 2) A shift of interest that evolved in me during the

fieldwork and during the writing process. Maybe identifying an interest is a better expression than shifting interest. Looking back on my short biography it is easy to see that my own reorientation in religious affiliation made it interesting for me to reflect upon variations and steps in such processes of making sense of changes in a person's life. 3) Empirical discoveries that made me discard my hypothesis about people converting on the grounds of opportunistic motivations and people's close relation to "traditional religion". When I asked my informants what they regarded as positive in their "tradition", they did not come up with many aspects. Respect for mothers' and the concept of worship were mentioned. Otherwise the parents ways of living and ways of thinking were conceived as negative, as far as I was able to perceive. This does not necessarily mean that my informants were not influenced by their upbringing. Meanwhile, they did not express any dilemmas brought forward by their own attachment to "traditional religion" in contrast to the missionaries or the Church leaders disparagement of such tradition. Neither did they express that their motives to convert were of a opportunistic nature. As a result I had to discard my hypothesis if I wanted to grasp my informants experience of meaning.

Theoretical position

Gullestad (1989:155-157) writes that there is at least three different ways to analyse socio-cultural phenomena in religious analysis: dimensions, aspects, and functions. As dimensions she mentions: faith in spiritual beings (Tylor), rites regarding something sacred (versus secular) within a Church (Durkheim) and systems of symbols that both express and create conceptions of faith (Geertz). Gullestad also mentions meaning, moral rules, myths and religious emotions as dimensions that could be connected to religious analysis. As an example of an analysis with regard to aspects instead of dimensions, she refers to Leach who sees ritual as the communicative aspect of general social acts. I understand the difference between focusing of dimension and focusing on aspects to be the difference between studying religious systems solely or studying the symbolic communication that is present in interaction that does not necessarily concern religion.

Gullestad writes that function could be seen both in relation to society and/or individuals. On the other hand, she says, whereas social integration and legitimising the system could be seen as important functions for society, functions for individuals could be "*meaning, explanations of the*

unknown, managing the uncontrollable, to endure pain, belonging to a community, and submission to and worshipping of unworldly powers” (Gullestad 1989:156 my translation). My focus on the ways in which Christianity becomes meaningful, deals with the function of religion for the individual. However, Gullestad writes, dimensions could have functions, for example could meaning both be seen as a dimension of religion and as a function for the individual. She argues that focusing on meaning as dimension might be vital before analysing it as a function of religion. What does it mean to study meaning as a dimension? Geertz recommend a study system of meanings embodied in the symbols:

“The anthropological study of religion is therefore a two-stage operation: first, an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up the religion proper, and, second, the relation of these systems to social-structural and psychological processes. My dissatisfaction with so much of contemporary social anthropological work in religion is not that it concerns itself with the second stage, but that it neglects the first, and in so doing takes for granted what most needs to be elucidated” (Geertz 1973: 125).

What is this system of meaning, not to say where is it? Is it the sum of possible meanings connected to religious symbols as they occur in rituals? For me it is important to focus on what religion means to persons. If there are symbols in the Bible or in Luther’s catechism or in the Service that the Evangelicals I am studying do not know, or to which they are indifferent – then these symbols themselves are not interesting for me. Systems of meanings must be attached to the person’s process of making symbols meaningful.

In his book “Symbols of Community”, Stromberg (1986) criticises the view of culture as both “patterns of” and “patterns for”⁵ behaviour, as we for instance see in some of Geertz’ work (1973:93). Stromberg claims that, since Boas, culture has been conceived as both a “*description of a way of life, and at the same time it is a phenomenon that actually works to order that way of life, a cause of the way of life*” (Stromberg 1986:7). This he thinks works as a reification - a theoretical confusion. Durkheim is compatible with modern conceptions of culture, Stromberg continues, in the sense that he also focused on society as a cognitive unity which issues uniform

⁵ According to Stromberg these statements were first formulated by Kroeber and Kluckhohns 1963: *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*), New York, Vintage Books, page 357.

action and is constituted by this shared consciousness. Further Stromberg thinks that American symbolic anthropological approaches in reality also claim that *“it is culture rather than persons that constitute the society”*, only exchanging the *idea* as the cultural unit, with the *sign*. The “mind” is thus left out from these studies. Culture is seen as a consensus system, while Stromberg wants to focus on culture as a commitment system:

“Persons in complex societies become committed to systematised outlooks such as a religion (as opposed to simply accepting those outlooks) because they find some such system peculiarly, probably uniquely, meaningful. The fact that some members of the society accept such a system while others do not shows that such meaningfulness cannot be understood as something inherent in the commitment system itself: it is only by turning to the person’s use of the system that the social efficacy of such a system may eventually be fathomed” (Stromberg 1986:9).

Meanwhile, Stromberg is not the only one among the researches focusing on religious life based on this point of view. People’s experience and creativity in relation to religion is focused on by for instance Turner (1987) and Kapferer (1986). Geertz (1986) also make statements in the epilogue to “The Anthropology of Experience”, edited by Turner and Bruner, that is in line with this argument.

“..without it (the concept of experience), or something like it, cultural analyses seem to float several feet above their human ground” “The Durkheimian manner that has been for so long the favored mode of dealing with symbolic materials in anthropology - the “see, it fits!” clanish-thoughts-for-clanish-societies approach to things - is silently but firmly discarded” (Geertz 1986:376).

Like Stromberg I am uncomfortable with a focus on (systems of) meaning that is detached from persons as creative human beings, persons who are not only bearers of meaning but also creators of meaning in their own life. I would therefore focus, as Stromberg suggests, on the believers’ **relationships to** and **use of** symbols of their faith: objects, words, ideas, elements of their religious language etceteras. His research on the Swedish Church “Immanuelskyrkan” indicates that this relationship could be closer than just an aspect of thought – it could be an experience that is also emotional and to some degree physical. (1986:49-50). How do we get access to

people's experiences of meaning? What are the relationship between speech or ritual acts and experience? I would like to quote Geertz again: *"Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else's inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness. It is all a matter of scratching surfaces"* (Geertz 1986). Expressions could be both verbal and non-verbal. I like to argue that people's verbal expressions, when they reflect on the relation between instances in their lives, should be seen as important inlets to their experience of meaning. This implies that I do not understand **experience** as the raw-material for thoughts solely, but rather the temporary result of the process of giving shape to sense- impressions and emotions.

Gullestad (1996) distinguishes between an **"experimental self"** and the various identities attributed to a person. Contrary to Goffman (1961), who thinks of man as a *"holding company"* for several selves, Gullestad defines the self as *"a continuous and processual effort to integrate the various experiences of the individual"* (ibid:18). The result of this integration effort might not be a complete consistency, she writes.

According to Gullestad there is a causal relation between the emergence of the individual self as something different than the roles, and the social differentiation of modernity. Role-distance is the concept she attaches to such a distance.

I will not touch on the debate concerning modernity in this thesis. What I would like to discuss is how my informants describe their conversion and whether they themselves point to any aspects of their experiences in life that drew them towards Christianity. I will also look at the relationship between these expressions of the ways in which Christianity became meaningful for the individual, and how these persons engage in interaction within the Church-community. In an analytical language this means discussing whether or not the members seem to have **role-distance** to the membership-identity. It is important to note that Gullestad speaks of role-distance in a different way than Goffman (1961): He uses the concept to describe how a person "falls out" of role-play or communicates ill-ease with the situation in question, while I understand Gullestad's (1996) use of the concept as means to describe the reflexive processes of a person that could not be traced directly to any of the person's social identities. It is role-distance in the last mentioned understanding I have found useful in relation to my material.

I do not think that such self-reflection are constructed into one single narrative that exists in our minds as a fixed “version”. On the contrary I will side with Rudie (1995) that the creation of such narratives is a continuous process and that human beings present different versions of themselves in different situations. None of these versions should be viewed as more real than others, with reference to Danielsen’s (1993) methodical discussion. This imply that I will not use the conversion accounts as means to get information about what the conversion “really” was, or how it was conceived by the convert at the moment it occurred. On the contrary I will focus on what the accounts reveals about the ways the individuals experiences Christianity as meaningful in the present.

In Stromberg’s (1993) latest work “Language and Self-transformation” he analyses conversion-narratives as means to deal with intentions the person concerned wishes to deny. I have no reason to believe that my informants use conversion-narratives for this purpose. Neither do I think that such an approach is ethically justifiable.

Kipp (1995) found different conversion-accounts in two Churches in the same local-community, and draws the attention to the way such accounts could reflect theology, style, and tradition in the Church-community the narrators are affiliated with. I will argue that this is only in part my impression of the ECG-members conversion accounts. My informants narratives also differed in significant ways. However, Before I present and discuss the conversion accounts, I will analyse the two Church-gatherings I studied in order to establish an important social context in which my informants’ religious reorientation are relevant.

3. CHURCH GATHERINGS

Every Sunday Omega and Bundung Churches were gathered for Church Service, about once a month in a joint Service for the two Churches and otherwise separately. During the weekdays, the Churches arranged exclusive meetings for men, for women, and for youths. In addition, meetings with special activities on the agenda were arranged regularly, like a weekly prayer meeting, members meeting and various planning meetings. As mentioned I chose to attend two weekly meetings: the Sunday Service and the Omega ladies' meetings.

In this chapter I will describe the different sequences of Sunday Services and Omega Ladies' meetings and how the gatherings proceeds as a whole. I will analyse these meetings as ritual as Kapferer (1986:191-192) defines the concept, as a "*complex compositional form as revealed through the process of performance*". By "performance" Kapferer understands "*a unity of text and enactment, neither being reducible to the other*". In other words he is preoccupied with combining an analysis of "structural properties" and the way the ritual elements reaches the audience - both how it is communicated and experienced. Defining ritual this way, Kapferer

does not presuppose any degree of emotional involvement in the ritual, like for instance Lukes does (1975), nor does he take for granted that the ritual stimulates reflection. This suits me well, since I want to focus on Christianity's meaningfulness for individuals. Meanwhile, I do not think an analysis of observational data from such rituals would be fully satisfactory in this respect. As a consequence my aim with this chapter is first and foremost to establish a social context that I can relate to the conversion accounts. Still, I begin a discussion about the individual experience in relation to Christianity in this chapter by discussing if the different "ritual words" are conceived as sacred by the participants, with reference to Tambiah's (1985) discussion of the use of sacred language in rituals. Then I will use the concepts indicative and producing rituals derived by Larsen (1979) and founded on the work of Gluckman and Goffman. In addition to my own observations of the Services, I will bring in a few statements the members gave to me in interviews, which concerns the elements in the gatherings particularly.

I want to stress that the "compositional form" of the Sunday Services is rule-governed, while The Omega Ladies' meetings were less characterised by this feature. It is important to note that I do not conceive "rule-governed" as fixed or locked. Individuals could negotiate the rules and adjust to new situations as for instance Parkin (1992) has pointed out. In addition, as underlined by Sally Moore, a factor of indeterminacy is always present in social processes - also in ritualised acts (Turner 1987:77).

Tambiah (1985) argues, and quotes Leach on the same issue, that deeds and uttering of words must be seen as possible equal important parts of rituals, dependant on the actual case. This stand is in fact opposing other anthropologists who even *define* ritual, as "*stereotyped behaviour consisting of a sequence of non-verbal acts and manipulation of objects*" (op.cit:17, my underlining). In my presentation I will concentrate more on the different verbal expressions than the non-verbal, since I conceived them to be central in both the Church Service and Omega Ladies' meetings.

3.1 SUNDAY SERVICES

The local branches of ECG, Omega and Bundung Churches have big, white-painted meeting rooms with many windows and few decorations. White plastic chairs and wooden benches are placed in rows, leaving a gangway in the middle. Opposite to the rows of chairs, in the middle of

a small raised platform, a rostrum made of unpainted wood is placed - decorated with a thin cross. Microphones and instruments such as keyboard and African drums are also placed on the platform. The entrance door is in the opposite part of the room, behind the roll of chairs. When people arrive they greet each other in a joyful way: shaking hands, smiling and saying “good morning, brother” or something of the like. After finding themselves a seat, they place a Bible or other belongings there to signalise that it is occupied, after which they often continue to greet and converse until the musicians start playing or someone walks to the front, takes the microphone and bids welcome to the Service. When this happens everyone finds his/her seat, stops talking and focuses on the person in front. This focus on speech, songs, prayer etceteras performed or requested from the raised platform, continues until it is announced that the meeting is finished.

Normally there are between 30 and 50 adults present in the Services. There is a tendency that men only just are in majority. In addition there are many children in all ages (accompanied by their parents) present in the beginning of the Service. After a while, they are taken outside to participate in children’s meeting. Inside the meeting-room people wear neat clothes. Most men are dressed in shirts and trousers in western style. Few wear African traditional clothes, like wide trousers and long shirts without collar in a one-coloured damask-material (called “mbasseng”) decorated with embroidery. The ladies wear either western produced dresses or feminine costumes sewed by local tailors, made in diverse material such as mbasseng, cotton with print or batik. The shoes are well polished, and slippers are not seen often although it is a very popular footwear in Gambia - they might be seen as to informal.

The praise-leader enters the platform and the musicians’ start playing a chorus with rapid rhythm. After a while, the praise-leader might say; “Let us stand up and praise the Lord, Hallelujah”. The majority of the congregation respond to the request by standing up. Some clap their hands and/or rock a little to the music. Everyone stands in front of their seat and looks either towards the platform, upwards or keeps their eyes closed. New choruses follow, and calmer, softer songs are sung after a while. No one talks to the person standing next to them, they look concentrated and introverted. While singing praise-songs, hands could be lifted upwards or necks could be bowed towards the floor. The leader of the meeting round off the praise-sequence by saying: “You may be seated”, and he goes on by welcoming those who attend

the Service for the first time. Normally this is done by asking them to stand up and tell their names. In a Service in Omega this was done in the following way: *“Wave your hands if you are glad to visit the house of the Lord. Let’s wave our hands. You are blessed. Are there any new visitors to Omega this morning? Stand up and tell your name. Hallelujah. Let’s welcome them.”* A joyful song is played while the congregation walks round in the room and greet each other by shaking hands and smiling. The leader of the meeting continues: *“You may be seated. Stand up again. Take it as exercise. Let’s take the offering. Go this way up and down in the middle.”* Another song accompanies the offering, this time with the chorus: *“Hallelujah, Amen”*. The praise-leader blesses the offer. - *“Hallelujah you may be seated. Amen. We call up (the leader of the Omega-ladies) to bring announcement.”* The lady informs of next week’s activities in a plain manner. The praise-leader speaks again: *“Lets welcome pastor (Peter) as he comes up to minister the word”*.

The feature I found most striking in this first part of the Service, was the mixture of strong command the worship and praise leader on the platform had - people are told to sit, rise, wave hands, pray, sing et cetera - and the quite informal style he performs this duty in - joking, laughing, dancing and directing in a very self-conscious way. The congregation participate in the praying, singing, offering et cetera, but only as directed from the platform. The rules and form of communication among the Church-members during the Services clearly differs from other settings in relation to how they concentrate, restrict their movements and verbal expressions according to social rules, and how they follow concrete directions from the raised platform.

Repeated order in the Church Services

During a Ladies-meeting in Omega Church where the ladies were planning a Sunday-Service, the leader of the Omega-ladies said: *“Let us pray. Because we are not going to make a show here, but to give a message from God”*. This fear that too much concentration on order in the Service could in fact hinder The Holy Spirits work instead of promoting it, was verbalised on other occasions as well. During the interviews several informants highlighted the focus in ECG on the Bible, and the need for the Holy Spirit to enable them understand, as factors that attracted them to the Church (Babokar, Moudou, Sarah and Melanie). To keep the level of organisation of the Service quite low, seemed to be an ideal among the members.

The Bible played an important role in the Service. Firstly, almost every participant in the Service brought his or her own Bible to Service. Secondly, the preacher quoted passages from the Bible frequently during the preaching. ECG does not have any prayer book or liturgy. The structure seems to be quite loose, and the atmosphere could be humorous and informal. Still, observing the Services made me aware of a pattern of activities, the succession of these activities and patterns of behaviour that came with the different activities as well as the Service as a whole. Observing a planning-process in front of a Service confirmed this picture as well as revealed that there is room for variation and innovation within the frame.

In every Service I participated, the following elements were present in almost identical order: praise, prayers, welcoming, offering, announcements, sharing from the word, praise again and closing prayer. On rarer occasions communion is celebrated. Baptism, blessing of a baby and investiture of a vice-pastor are probably carried out whenever there is a need for such rituals - during my stay it happened only during the Easter-conference. In addition, testimonies are shared now and then, mimes, solo or choir-songs are performed occasionally as variation to the speeches which serve as the most common way of sharing the word.

The preaching

Today's preacher comes up to the platform. He might ask the musicians to play another song before he starts to preach. He might also say a short prayer to start with, for example: *"No one as holy as you. No one as precious. Set us free in the name of the Lord"*. The main issues raised in the preaches concerned God's plan with each member; Salvation is a start, but God's plan with a persons life reach further. Each member was urged to point out how God has changed his or her life. It was also stressed that positive changes in lifestyle were important factors which could make them convince others to convert. So saying, changed lives were understood as the Church's best evangelising effort because non-Christians could see examples of concrete effects of Christianity and thereby be motivated to become Christians too.

Some preachers were not very concrete, for instance using the Day of Judgement to appeal to the members' seriousness and dedication in their life as Christians in general. Questions like "Will you follow Jesus when he comes" and statements like *"Be sure that you come inside (the door to heaven), because when it closes and you knock on the door, Jesus would say; I don't know you"*,

requests a careful evaluation of ones life according to Christian standards. On some occasions the preacher also suggested concrete fields of improvement or caution. Once the use of entertainment materials was on the agenda: *“You are not supposed to watch whatever TV-program or listen to whatever cassette”*. Another time the relationship to the Church-community was taken up: *“Don’t ask the Church to lend you money. We have had some bad experiences. People can’t pay off the debt and feel guilty. We want to help people to get jobs...If we spend time gossiping and fire at each other we are really wasting important time. Some brothers are not even worth spending time on.”*

Bible reading was incorporated in the speeches. Sometimes the preacher asked a member to read a couple of verses for the congregation, and the chosen member got up and read, although most often the preacher read himself. The verses were not always explained, but often referred to in the following speech. The message could also be taken up in prayer, where the preacher could ask God to help the congregation and himself to follow the example of the hero in the story or to be able to avoid the behaviour which the particular Biblical story condemns.

Some metaphors were used in the speeches. *The door* stands for admission to heaven, *children* for Christians, *house* or *body* for the congregation. These are metaphors also used in the Bible. The same goes for *the flock* as metaphor for the congregation who is directed by a *shepherd* who could either represent the Lord or a spiritual leader like a pastor. Other metaphors are also well known outside of Christian surroundings. For example that fruit stands for achievements or *heart* for the innermost will or spirit in a human being. *“Your spirit is gone”*, then means that you are no longer a Christian. *“To see”* means to understand religious truths, and *“to be blinded”* then means that you are unable to understand the same truths.

The preaching were in most cases characterised by the use of similes and hypothetical questions and minor stories. The main story emphasised a point - idea or thought - and by putting different stories together, the message would be made clear - maybe by using some explanatory sentences as well. The following speech (Sunday Service at Omega branch 17 march 1996) is a good example on how this preaching-method was carried out. I have numbered the similes and hypothetical questions that occurred in order to comment them later.

“God is faithful. The Bible says that God doesn’t change. (1) How many of you are happy

when people don't believe in you? Let's read from the gospel of Lukes, chapter 13 verses 23-24: "Then said one unto him, Lord, are there few that be saved? And he said unto them, strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able."⁶

If you love God as your personal saviour, you are on the right path. In Noah's time, 8 persons were saved from the flood. It might seem like God is hard, but He has told us in advance so that we can know when the time comes. (2) What would you do if you know that your friend is going to be ran over by a car in few seconds? You would push your friend, or at least shout to warn him.

(3) When Youssu Ndour have concert in the stadium. Everyone pushes to get in there first. Why? They don't want to lose the show. They want to be there when it starts. And they know that the door will be closed as soon as the stadium is filled up.

(4) If you have a child who behaves so bad that you regret giving birth to the child... It was God who closed the door - not Noah. Just imagine how it was to float round and watch the Ark. But Noah could not open, because God had closed the door. Let's read from the gospel of Lukes, chapters 12 verse 35....Wickedness had reached such a level that a demonstration was necessary. Let's read Peters second letter, chapter 3, verse 3: "Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts,..." (5) If you for instance go shopping for your wife and forget the butter on purpose..

Mankind origin from Africa. It is proved that there has been a flood - that is why we have oil. The Bible doesn't explain all the details, it just say that God created heaven and earth. (6) If a thief enters your house, rob you and leaves a note: - I'll come back next week, would you just lay down and wait?

It is enough atomic weapons to destroy the earth four times. "One day for the Lord is like 1000 years and 1000 years like one day. He is not slow"(quotation from the Bible).

⁶ Quotations are from *The Bible Authorized King James Version*, 1997 Oxford University Press (the only available at the Tromsø University Library, although other - more liberal - translations were commonly used in ECG).

Einstein's theory of relativity: if you travel faster than the light, time reverses. What is eternity? There is no time in eternity. It is here on earth that we are short of time. We live less than 150 years. Why do people see reality only when they get very ill? It is nothing worse than being too late and knowing that you could have done something. Scientists dig into reality as chickens. They will discover everything as time goes by.

Let's read the gospel of John, chapter 14, from verse 1: "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. And if I go prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye must be also." John, 17, verse 24: "Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world." (7) How many of you would like to travel to England or America - any of those countries that have closed the doors? You need an invitation-letter. Hey, Jesus has already given us a visa. Have you noticed that when the pastor preaches and wants to stop, God is not finished yet? He has more he wants to say through him."

If we look at the hypothetical question numbered (1) it seems to be incoherent with the sentences before and after. If we take a closer look we see that the question is both introducing an issue and works as a sequence in it self. It is not only a rhetorical question but also a sort of code for an entire argumentation. "How many of you are happy when people don't believe in you" points to a row or arguments that might be as follows: -You probably don't like it at all. How do you think God react when human beings don't believe in him then? The same as you. So think through this next time you doubt God's word... The question thereby works as a metonym - a symbolic utterance whereby a part of a whole stands for the totality. At the same time the preacher tries to make people imagine that they were in God's position. Then he goes on by explaining God's strictness towards those who will turn to him when it is too late - on the Day of Judgement. The sequence thereby serves as a preparation for the subsequent issues raised in the speech.

Sequence 2,3 and 4 all concern the Day of Judgement and different aspects of behaviour this thought should create in man. Sequence 2 concerns the necessity of evangelising - that you owe

your friends the duty to warn them. The example about a friend being ran over by a car points to eternal separation from God (and even united with the Devil). Human death here works as metaphor for spiritual death. Sequence 3 concerns the necessity to be eager to be included in Gods eternal kingdom. The key-metaphor here is the gate (to the stadium), which is a well-known metaphor that stands for the division between believers and non-believers, closeness to, or separation from God. Last, sequence 4 concerns (like sequence 1) how God might feel when human beings disobey Him. In sequence 2 and 3 the arguments are represented more fully, the questions asked are also answered. However, the connection between the story/the row of argument and the message in the speech, is not verbalised. The presence of a shared symbolic universe is necessary to make this form of communication work. The preacher uses a well-known situation, or a well known setting to make his point clear and to enable the listeners to be attached to the message.

In sequence 5 we merely see an everyday-life exemplification on what “evil wishes” could be. Sequence 6 has the same purpose as sequence 1 and 4 - methonymic: - Of course you would not lay down and wait. You would secure the house, hire a watchman or move to another house. However the story, and elements in it, also perform the same function as metaphors. In the Bible the Devil is compared with a thief. Here we see that “a thief “ stand for the Devil. The whole story then could be seen as pointing to a normal human situation separated from God, and how the need for action is obvious in the preachers opinion, in such a situation. Last sequence 7 relates the widespread dream among poor Africans to go to Western countries, with the message about going to heaven. A visa stands for the gospel, which invites human beings back in contact with God. “America” et cetera serves as metaphors for heaven/ Closeness to God.

Reading between the lines of the whole speech, I observe that the preacher alternated between Bible quotations, metonym sequences and direct speech, whereby all sequences concerned a main-issue in the speech in one way or the other. The main-issue in this speech was that there will be a final judgement and that it would be wise to act in various ways before the moment occurs, when it will be too late to make changes. Meanwhile, I do not find obvious logical transitions between the sequences. Some of the transitions seem to break from lines of arguments. To use symbolic language, it seems like the preacher followed one path in a moment, then switched to another and then to another again, hoping to lead different people through

different paths leading to the same place, that is recognition of the message he wanted to communicate. The preacher did not have manuscript and did not stand still at one place on the platform. Rather he walked around using hands and facial expression to underline his message. Sometimes he also used miming to visualise a story he had told. He gave an impression of self-confidence by not hesitating, glancing directly at those present in turn, using a clear and loud voice, a relaxed appearance and playful body language. Very often he rounded off the speech with a special appeal to those present who were not Christians to “give their life to Jesus”. This could be done by praying for them and giving them time to respond to the message individually.

Relation to the ritual words

Tambiah (1985) discusses the widespread use of exclusive (meaning not understood by people in general) languages in rituals - even in rituals where the words are meant to be heard by the audience/participants. He wonders if this is done to underline the words sacred nature, in contrast to profane language. Having discussed different cases he concludes, that the *“disjunction between sacred and profane language that exists as a general fact is not necessarily linked to the need to embody sacred words in an exclusive language or in writing.”* In other words, he can not find general differences between the examples where exclusive language is used in religious ritual and those where local language is used, in respect to the participant’s attitudes towards the sacredness of the words concerned.

What does Tambiah mean by sacred? Is he referring simply to a distinction in relation to daily language which requests other codes for interpretation? Or is he referring to people’s expectations that such words have special power to make what they say? In order to discuss how my informants relate to ritual words it is necessary to differentiate between different types of “ritual words”, as Tambiah himself suggests.

Speaking in tongues are the only activity among ECG-members where exclusive language is used, though this activity is never practised in the Service. Sarah explains why:

“The Bible says that if you pray in tongues, there must be an interpretation in the public, not to personal self. So I don’t know; here we don’t do it. We feel it can hinder some people from coming to the Church. Because not everybody like.. even most of our

missionaries they don't like that." On the other hand this is practised at home, and Sarah seems to feel comfortable with it: "...like me and my husband we will pray in tongues when we are praying together, nobody has to disturb us. And the pray in tongues is I think we speak in a word that nobody can understand. Some people can understand - the one that is meant for interpretation."

Otherwise the languages used in the Service are, as mentioned, English, Wolof, Mandinka or translations between two of the languages, and thus totally understandable to the participants. I believe the words in prayer or worship was understood as sacred in the way that they are supposed to please God or to bring the individual or the group in closer contact with God. This sacredness could either be strongly emotional or conceived simply by the awareness of saying something which the Bible claims as pleasing to God. The consciousness of doing something sacred could be as important when praying alone at home as in the group, though the efficacy of for instance a healing prayer is regarded higher when there is more than one person praying.

God's word (Quotations from the Bible or explanations of a Biblical passage) was also seen as something sacred, of higher rank than every-day language, which should not be questioned as other statements are. However, not every preach or parts of it were conceived as God's word. Some of my informants were at least critical to what the pastor or others were saying in their preaches, and underlined that they had to find the message in the Bible themselves, or feel confidence in their own "heart" before they accepted a statement as God's word. One of Melanie's statements in the interview pointed out this attitude very well:

"I accept it as true, even if I don't understand it. Trusting that the understanding comes. I pray that the Holy Spirit should help me, open my eyes, teach me, help me to understand. My mind is too small. If someone tells me he has a message from God, I would normally seek confirmation in my own heart. If they are speaking from the scripture I would not have any problem with that. My basic attitude is not to question the word of God. I can not understand God with my mind only. His spirit has to touch my spirit."

Jacob on his hand was critical of using the preach in the Church Service as an opportunity of reprimanding individual members:

“At one meeting the pastor said it’s someone in the Church who have a girl in his house. At first I was wondering if it was me, because I always have girls visiting me, but then he said that the girl was living in the house, and I knew it was this other guy he meant. I felt his pain. It’s not a nice way to do it. If the pastor was older he would have talked to him in private, not so official like that.”

Prophecies occurred in Sunday Service occasionally. A prophecy is a message claimed to be given to a person by God in order to share it with others. The message is often expressed in the form: “God (your Father/ the Holy/the Creator etc.) says:..” In one meeting a young man came with a message expressed in this way: *“God says: I have put my foot down. This Sunday marks a new time in the Church...”* The participants at the meeting looked at each other and became very quiet. When the message ended, the pastor said: *“I am thanking God for the word that came through our brother.”* During his speech, the pastor reprimanded those who did not take the prophecy seriously: *“Some of you took the word that was prophesied this morning lightly. You were thinking: - who is this small boy dressed in this way.. What has he to tell us?”* He stressed that God could speak through all people.

A great deal of what is said in the Service, I believe, is not conceived as sacred at all, though interpreted within the special context of a Service. The welcoming, the announcements, the jokes - these are elements of the Service that might strengthen the feeling of togetherness and being a social group, but are not directed to spiritual forces or to the relationship with God what so ever.

That some words in the Service are conceived as sacred in those ways I have discussed, do not mean that they are excluded from the universe of position making, communication of social rank and performance of skill. I believe that a person can both be preoccupied with for instance the idea that his prayer could effect healing and that he can choose words and approaches that are more or less appreciated by the others, and thereby effect a promotion in his social rank. Not least, I believe that being active in the Services, by reading a passage from the Bible or playing a part in a mime, could influence the individuals acceptance and integration in the Church.

When Tambiah argues that a ritual can either be seen as a stimulus for activities, or a response to preceding events, I think he is oversimplifying - as he himself sees as a risk (op.cit: 35). In my opinion much of what is going on when ECG-members are gathered for Service, are to maintain

a community that evaluates the participants according to particular moral standards, and offers a categorisation of them as God's saved children, an idea that is challenged by outsiders. The Church-gatherings purpose could in this respect be seen as creating a social context in which the Church-members could maintain their conversion-narratives.

Meanwhile, the aspects Tambiah points to was not absent in the rituals. Again and again the mechanisms of conversion, where one make up one's mind to change something in his or her life - reach for Gods help - and experience a change, are requested and recommended in the preaches. It is recommended **also for those who have already converted** - as means of development for each member - and thereby to strengthen the group as a whole. The individuals are urged to evaluate their choices and ways of life constantly, and always struggle to develop their character and attitude towards God and Gods word. This messages must be seen as stimulus for activities.

Indicative and producing qualities

Tord Larsen (1979) refers to Gluckman and Goffman's theories on ritual in relation to it's subject. Gluckman lays emphasis on rituals' indicative qualities, for instance highlighting a persons rank by using a uniform. The validity of such a symbol can be questioned: Is the person wearing the majors uniform really a major? The other way round one can try to undermine the rank in a hierarchy of the symbol in question. This is possible since the relationship between the symbol and the subject of the symbol is arbitrary. If a ritual is participated by only an exclusive group of persons, it is likely that this ritual primarily works indicative.

Goffman on his side highlights the producing qualities of rituals. If a person changes rank due to participation in a ritual, this ritual could be primarily called producing. Larsen draws a parallel to the concept of fetishism. Thus the ritual causes what it symbolises.

My view is that my informants' conceived Baptism and Communion first and foremost as indicative rituals. Some Christians believe that the Holy Ghost enter the individual during the baptism-ritual. This is not the attitude common within ECG. My informants speaks of Baptism more like the strong confirmation of the decision to convert, often done after a long period of changing lifestyle as a result of converting. Likewise when it comes to Communion: Many Christians believe that forgiveness actually is received through the Communion-ritual. For ECG-

members, I think the Communion signals unity and reminds them about the Gospel, which they have acquired through conversion. It is underlined that one should not participate in this ritual if not in peace with God. In a Sunday Service then, participation in the Communion would clearly communicate who feel they are in peace with God and who do not. They have to take the choice again, classify their relationship with God as good or bad at the moment. These two rituals then serve as one individual and one collective celebration of their relationship to God and their share of the salvation.

The participation in the Sunday Services in general I see as less clear indicative rituals. To take part in a Service does not alone indicate that you are a Christian. If you participate in prayers and worship however, people would think that you are a believer even if participation in communion would be a much, much stronger indication. The prayers and the worship are also conceived by many of the members as producing rituals. It is through worship you can please God and receive his blessing or feel His presence. It is through prayer that you can work out problems or disease and later on receive evidence that healing or changes have occurred.

3.2 THE OMEGA LADIES' MEETINGS

The “Omega ladies” met every Tuesday either in the Omega Church meeting room or in the house of one of the ladies. The meetings were open for every woman who was related to Omega branch of ECG, but during my fieldwork there were only between seven and twelve ladies present at the same time. In the following I will compare the Omega Ladies’ meetings with the Sunday Services, in order to show the range of variation in the Church’s different joint activities, and also look out for patterns of behaviour which seems to accompany certain activities in both settings.

Variable agenda

The activities at the Ladies’ meetings varied from one Tuesday to the other, alternating between Bible-studies, prayers, planning and visiting. On several of the Tuesdays during my fieldwork, the ladies were preoccupied with planning for a “Family-Service”, a Church Service they were in charge of. These meetings were held in the Omega Church meeting room. On other occasions we met in peoples homes.

The fact that the agenda varied from one week to the other, implies that the aspect of rule-governance identified in Sunday Services, were less evident in the Ladies' meetings. Still, I identified several of the same elements in the Ladies' meetings as in the Sunday Service, accompanied with similar modes of behaviour as in the Services. A short prayer was said and a song or two were sung every Tuesday, regardless of what else was on the agenda. When in prayer, hands were held together, eyes were closed and necks either bowed or rose upwards - just like in the Services. One person prayed aloud while the others were quiet or mumbled. Now and then an "Amen", "Thank you, Lord" or "Yes, Lord" were heard from the others. The songs that were sung were of the same kind as those sung in the Services; simple choruses often with rapid rhythm, but in the Ladies' meetings they were normally sung while seated.

Atmosphere and participation

Although some of the ritual elements in the Services could be recognised in the Ladies' meetings, and the phrases and use of metaphors were not very different, I perceived a different atmosphere among the ladies than in the Service. This, I believe was due to several factors. A small group of people seated round a coffee table in a private home gave an impression of informality. To be admitted into the hostess private sphere - her home - can probably be associated with friendship, closer relationship than what necessarily was present between all members of the Church. The absence of a platform and a microphone also contributed to the impression of intimacy.

Every Tuesday several of the ladies came too late to the meeting. They were teased in a friendly way, but no one verbalised irritation because of the lateness. I got the impression that the ladies enjoyed to wait for late-comers. They gave each other compliments on the clothes they wore. If someone wore something new, they were asked where they bought it - whereby stories of bargaining and prices sometimes followed. The ladies also asked each other if anyone had seen those not present lately. One Tuesday in March while we were sitting outside the Church waiting for the others to arrive, one lady explained that people came late because they all were so busy: "*I had to cook before I came here*", she said and remarked that men seldom cooked because they did not know how to do it. When I replied that men could learn to cook, she said that they probably did not bother to learn as long as they did not have to. This kind of awareness of gender was demonstrated on some occasions when the ladies chatted. As we will see, the meetings were

gendered according to topics that were raised also when testimonies were given, Bible passages shared, prayer requests made, etceteras - simply because they were based on the ladies experiences and interests.

Except when the group had visiting one of the Omega ladies on the agenda, I noticed that the ladies had an awareness of the main agenda that did not include the informal chatting and conversing which each gathering started off with. After a while someone said: "Maybe we should begin.." The chatting was thus not conceived of as a part of the meeting - just something to do before and after the meeting. From the moment the meeting "started" (from the participants point of view), statements were directed to the whole group instead of certain individuals, except when someone in particular were asked if they had a song to propose or something to share.

Considering the number of persons who participated in the meetings by making comments, giving testimonies, prayer-proposals, song-proposals, reading a passage from the Bible etceteras, the Ladies meeting were very different from the Service. Almost every lady present at the meetings contributed verbally in one way or the other, while; in the Services only the chairperson, the preacher and the one making announcement normally participated verbally.

When a lady wanted to contribute in the Ladies meeting, she waited until the lady talking became silent before she asked: "*If you were done, I would like to share something with you..*" or "*I would like to give a testimony, if there is time for that..*" If no one refused, she would go on with what she wanted to say. The members paid attention when one of them was speaking, reading or praying. Still in between the contributions the members made frequent comments, in contrast to the Services. The group as a whole participated actively.

Personalising the Message

Most of the testimonies concerned how the ladies had felt God's help in their everyday life, one way or the other. I will give two examples on testimonies in a Ladies meeting. Both cited from a Tuesday when Bible-studies were on the agenda and the ladies were responding to a Bible passage concerning how God helps the righteous:

Sanneth: "There is something that happened to me, yes, just few hours ago. Just fitting as you are speaking like identifying the faithfulness of God in that situation. I had just

reached the Church, and the watchman told me you just left. I said: - Lord, how can I miss you. I don't know the place, what shall I do? And I don't feel like going back home. So I said, -Ah, by chance I will find some - maybe Awa is late, let me just stand on the roads side. (the other ladies are laughing). I stood there quite long time and nobody was coming. I said: - Am I the only one today - maybe I'm the only one who is late? I said: - Lord! And I don't feel like going home. I just don't feel like going home. Then I pray: - God, you have to find a way for me to get there. I want to fellowship to day, so I just don't want to go home. I want a lift. Any way I can get to that place, please help me. So I was just standing there, not knowing what to do, and not expecting anybody, because the time was going and nobody was.. Suddenly I saw Sister Anne. Then she came and said: - Do you know the place? I said: - I don't know the place. I thought I would meet Pastor Peter. Maybe he is picking up the latecomers. She said: - he is not here. Maybe he went with them. So, we just stood there chatting. Not knowing what to do, whether to go back home or to.. Both of us felt we didn't want to going home. And as we were standing there chatting, we saw Martha passing by across the street. And she was heading somewhere, so we said: - Ah! (the others laughing). So we called Martha, and Martha came and she said she knew the place. God is so faithful! Look, I was so glad. I said: - God, you are good. Because I could have gone home. I didn't know the place, and I wouldn't have been here. But I said: - God, somehow.. I want to be here, so help me to be here. And God is so faithful, Martha could have come early, but somehow he helped me to be here.”

Sarah: Yes, at the faithfulness of God. Last Tuesday we met, I told you that I was going to Sibanor, and I went. When I went there, the urine was bacterial ++, albumen++. But I praise that God.. He is so faithful, and I didn't take any medicine - they didn't give me any medicine. The doctors said: - go in two weeks and come back. And I came, three weeks, then I went back. Another test was taken - there was nothing. No bacteria, no albumen. The urine was fine, the doctor said it was very good. So I just want to praise God for his faithfulness, because when we go to Him in prayer, we trust Him, there are so many things that He can do that we can not even know if He has done it. And the second one was: When I was in Sibanor, I spring my muscle, I couldn't walk. It was fine when I was there, but when I sat in the car for a long time, I came down at the mission - I couldn't walk home. My leg was so paining. I just said: - This leg is paining. So I went to bed, and at

three O'clock I knew the Lord just wake me, because I couldn't straighten my foot on the bed, so I call Stephen: Let's pray, because tomorrow I want to go to work, I don't want to miss it. So we prayed. I was going up and I said Jesus by your tr.. I'm healed. So this morning, yes, I didn't get any medication, I went to work, and even my wrist is okay. So I just want to say that the Lord is faithful. If we trust Him, we shall feed on His faithfulness. I thank the Lord for that.

The testimonies do communicate faith, and willingness to see causal relations between God's intervention and events in everyday life. However, the testimonies also served as an opportunity to share those every day life events with the others.

Also Bible passages and song-texts were made relevant for the ladies present situation. A Bible passage could be quoted to support a personal experience, as an introduction or example on how the passage could be understood, in the light of the situation. Often these stories included reflections on the ladies' own behaviour and attitudes compared with the standards the Bible passage drew up, and in some cases with certain self criticism or regret. There was normally not any direct response from the members on such statements of regret. No one said "Oh, don't expect so much of your self. No one is perfect. What else could you have done? Your reaction was perfectly understandable." The next lady to hold the floor would simply relate to the topic from her experience, without mentioning the last contribution.

Prayer requests

The ladies emphasised continually, both in the meetings and in interviews, the relief they felt when "laying an issue in God's hands" in prayer. They spoke of prayer as a way to regain hope and optimism in times of challenge. This effect, I think, was due to their belief that God can intervene in human lives. In addition I think that the way prayer-requests were put forward and dealt with in the meetings, played a significant social role. When prayer-requests were made, the matter was explained throughout, in addition to how the lady felt about it. In contrast to testimonies and passages that were shared, prayer requests were commented on by the other ladies. They asked questions, gave advice, comforted and joined in prayer over the issues. Let us look at what kind of issues that were put forward as prayer requests, quoting my edited field-notes:

“Today the ladies met at Melanie’s place. There were 12 women present. We chatted for a while about children, the heat and jobs. Melanie served cold juice. Sarah said that we should start. “Is there any prayer requests or anyone who want to share something?” she asked. A missionary, who was part of the Omega Ladies group, responded by saying that she was much better in her back. The ladies had prayed for her earlier on. This week she had another medical problem she wanted the group to pray for.

Sarah was the next speaker, receiving congratulations when informing us that she was pregnant and felt that God helped her. She explained that her doctors had told her that it was not possible to go through a pregnancy after the serious difficulties she had with high blood pressure last time she was pregnant. However, God had told her that what she needed was rest. By the way - she did not have any pains so far and she felt so well in the mornings.

Melanie asked the group to pray for a girl that she knew who was admitted to the hospital. She told the ladies what kind of illness the doctors suspected the girl to suffer from, and that she was very worried about her. The other ladies comforted her by saying that the hospital in question was well regarded, and that the girl would get proper care there. Melanie reflected upon how she was going to help the girl if the diagnosis was correct.

Murel shared with the others some trouble she went through at work. The head-teacher had asked for a schedule for the lessons. The parents had complained because the academically weak children didn’t pass exams. Murel said that she became very worried when she couldn’t finish the schedule for the next day, but she had laid the case in God’s hands. She thanked God that she did not get a reprimand the following day, only a postponement to finish the schedule.

Awa talked about her neighbour and previous classmate. They were neighbours for one year without having known of each other. One day they just met in the street. They also gave birth to kids about the same time, but still they did not have much contact. Suddenly Awa met the woman very thin, just a shadow of her old self. Awa had heard crying from the woman’s home the night before, like if it had been a fight. While they where talking, a

man came and asked the woman where she was going. The woman replied that she was going to the supermarket. The man looked at her in a hard way. Awa concluded: "I am sure she is going through problems. I am going to visit her and share the gospel with her. Maybe she needs to talk to someone. I want us to pray for her. I felt really bad for not taking contact for such a long time". The group came with suggestions on how Awa could take contact with the woman, and supported her decision to visit her.

The prayer requests had been shared, and Sarah read a passage from the Bible. The missionary read a passage too. Then she told a story about a kid living near her place. When the child came to her with black fingers and a wet dress, she thought more upon hindering her white skirt being dirty than on the child. Still the following day the child was friendly and had confidence in her as before. The child's attitude, she thought, was an example of the confidence we should have in God. The story and the way it was told also gave an impression of her own regrets and humbleness. Next, she picked up the guitar and the group sang some choruses.

Sarah started to pray for the prayer requests. The group was quiet while Sara prayed. After praying over an issue, she gave time for the group to mumble individual prayers. After a while she said: "In Jesus name we pray", and continued with the next issue. In the end Sarah asked us to take each other's hands and pray for the fellowship among the women and for the house we were sitting in (Melanie's home). This marked the end of the meeting and the conversation soon ran lively and joyfully again."

We notice that the ladies were involved personally in the issues brought up. Their own or their friends health, problems at work, friends that were in trouble - all these are issues that touched their everyday life. I never heard someone pray for general issues such as for instance peace in the world, development of the public health Service or unemployed youths. The ladies` interests were in coping with everyday life and helping friends and relatives in one way or the other.

The prayer-request as a ritual element worked as an opportunity to get advice, comfort and support - in addition to joint prayer for the issue in question.

Visiting

As I said earlier on, the chatting before and after the meetings some times revealed an awareness of issues concerning gender,. This was also recognisable on the Tuesdays the group of ladies visited one of the ladies in the Church. Let us look at my field notes of such a gathering:

“Today we were visiting a woman in the Church who was expecting a baby. We were 7 people gathered. The hostess welcomed us over and over again. Then she served cashew fruits and a local red squash. The ladies gave the hostess compliments for her gown. The hostess showed us her wedding pictures from the previous December. She explained to me that the husband wanted to be with her for many years before she agreed.

One lady had brought her baby with her. The baby cried a bit. The others told her to put the child to the breast. She said that the child was just sleepy. The others asked whether she was shy to breast-feed when they were in the room. She replied that she could even breast-feed in Church. They had a special corner for that, Awa explained. The baby’s mother said that the child was not hungry now, and she did not like to remove her jacket.

The next topic of conversation was the fruits we were eating. Then about breast milk. About nursing a premature baby. Sarah thought that the baby she lost because of an early delivery could have been saved if the nurses had given it proper care. Someone asked whether we should sing a song. We did, and Sanneth prayed for the household, and for the persons present.

I was asked if it was okay that they visited me on the following meeting-day to have Bible studies. I agreed. They were also curious to know the rent in the place I was staying. Someone in the Church needed a flat, and I was going to leave the country soon. But the rent of 800 Dalasi a month (533 NKr) was too high for that person, they concluded.”

Singing and praying were part of this gathering too, but the visiting meetings all together were not more rule-governed than an ordinary conversation. The hostess was given more attention than each of the other ladies, and this was probably the aim of the visit. The group wanted to give the hostess a feeling of being noticed and appreciated for various parts of her life and personality, her past, her marriage, her pregnancy, her clothes, her home and the refreshment’s

she chose to serve. Another time, another lady would be regarded with a visit.

The stressful situation of the lady who brought her baby to the gathering, could be recognised as the group suspecting that she did not meet the child's need for milk because of her own shyness. Most of the ladies want to involve in each other's life. We see an example of this in practical aspects when they look out for a flat for one Church member.

Planning for Ladies-Sunday

In the middle of March, I joined the "Omega ladies" in a meeting where they planned the Sunday Service they were going to lead in the end of the month. They had decided to practice on a mime and a song referring to the Biblical text about the ten virgins. A note on which the program of the Service and the lady responsible for each activity were written, was handed out. The program looked like this:

1. Time of praise/worship & prayer

2. Introduction and welcome

3. Offering

4. Announcements

5. Testimony

6. Solo

7. Testimony

8. Mime & Song - "The Ten Virgins"

9. Sharing from the Word

10. Time of Praise/worship

11. Closing Prayer

We notice that the usual elements are present in the program. In addition the ladies have planned for solo-song, testimonies and a mime.

The ladies practised on these elements, but they also practised on how to collect the offering. The ladies responsible to collect the offer planned to walk among the congregation with small baskets, on each side of the gangway. Another way to collect the offer that was practised in the Services' was to place the basket on the podium for people to go there and make their contribution. I assume that the ladies preferred to collect while people were seated in order that people would be at ease. On the contrary, when the basket is placed on the platform, those who do not have anything to offer remain seated. As a result it becomes obvious that they have not contributed anything. However, this was never verbalised by the ladies.

The food each member of the Church was asked to bring that Sunday, should be shared after the Service. When the Family-Sunday was announced a week beforehand there were jokes about the food. The leader of the Omega-ladies made the announcements as she often did, and said: "*the men use to escape by bringing drink, but we like to taste your food too.*"

The seriousness and detailed planning with which the Sunday Service were undertaken by the ladies, were striking. Maybe this was due to lack of experience in having the responsibility for a Church Service, which normally was taken care of by the pastor together with members of a praise and worship-group. Or it might also be the fact that they wanted to impress the men or make a slightly different program to show that there were alternative ways. In another ladies meeting some of the attendants complained about the men coming too late for Service when the ladies were in charge. "*Not all of them, but some*", the ladies leader remarked.

Comfort, support and control

The ladies' meetings are less ritualised than the Sunday Service. There is variety in their activity, the same activities are not repeated from week to week. Still, I recognised some of the usual ritual elements identified in the Service. Songs and prayers were elements at every meeting, regardless of what other activities that were planned for that day. I found the behaviour - both verbal and physical - during prayer similar to the one during prayers in the Service. In addition,

the group conceived the Ladies' meetings as units different from casual social interaction, in that the ritual aspect is not completely absent.

During the meetings, most of the contributions made by the ladies were somehow related to their own experience. By this, the ladies shared experiences about situations that preoccupied their attention; what made them worried, happy, angry, thoughtful, humble or sad. The testimonies were stories of gratitude towards God. Prayer-requests allowed worries and trouble to be shared and discussed. By making women's life and thoughts relevant, the meetings became gendered. Some times an awareness of their own situation in contrast to men's, came up during the chatting before or after a meeting. For the ladies who wanted a close relationship to the other members, the Ladies' meetings seemed to serve as an integrated female fellowship where their needs were met.

Summary

In this chapter I have pointed out that the Sunday Services differed from the Omega Ladies' meetings in the sense that they were more rule-governed. In addition the Services were characterised by strong direction from the platform, where few persons performed in various ways. The members who were not in charge of the meeting also had an opportunity to participate by singing, offering, taking part in Communion etceteras, in some sequences of the Services, but were quite passive listeners in large parts of the Church Services. On the other hand almost all ladies who were present in the Ladies' meetings participated actively in sharing and discussing their own and the other ladies' experiences, and the atmosphere were more relaxed.

Is this difference due to gender differences? Would I have found similar differences between the Sunday Services and the Omega Men's meetings? This is a question impossible for me to answer, but based on the data-material I have it seems like such a gender difference was present in the interaction in Church gatherings.

When it comes to the individuals experience of meaningfulness I find that it is difficult to discuss properly when analysing my observations of such Church-gatherings solely. In this presentation I have included some statements given to me in interviews. Now I will turn to the conversion accounts to evolve this issue further. I will come back to in what ways the interaction in the Church-gatherings could be understood as a context for the conversion accounts.

4. CONVERSION

I now turn to the part of the inquiry that concerns the persons reflections on their lives before they “converted”, how they describe their change of affiliation and whether they themselves point to any aspects of their experiences in life that drew them towards Protestantism. Some of the informants are previous Muslims and some are previous Catholics. I will present parts of the interviews and draw out what the respondents say about these issues. Do they conceive their “conversion” as a turning point in their life? Was it a choice they made, or a spiritual intervention by God? Did they experience any changes in their inner life, if so do they say anything of what caused such changes? Next I will compare the interviews and see if I as a researcher find something they have in common regarding these questions. Last I will discuss what positive and negative sanctions the members meet within the Church-community in order to widen our understanding of the relation between the interviews and the context the Church provides. Please note that all names on persons are fictitious.

4.1 ACCOUNTS OF CONVERSIONS

The first two - Omar and Babokar - are Gambian men, and former Muslims who also practised “traditional religion”. Both of them are members of Bundung Church. Moudou, Sarah and Melanie are members in Omega Church and are all immigrants to the Gambia. Moudou is a Ghanaian man and a former Muslim. Melanie and Sarah are women from Sierra Leone who had been in contact with the Catholic Church before they became Protestants. Sarah also was in contact with “tradition” in the way that she is circumcised and almost became about the fiftieth wife of a chief. Due to the fact that these members come from different countries, I will refer to some statistics, historical data etc. when introducing each interview, what I think is relevant in order to contextualise.

Omar

Omar is a Wollof but speaks Mandinka and a little Fula as well. The Mandinkas’ constitutes the largest part of the Gambian population (39,5% - 1993-census). Although the Wollofs’ only constitutes 14,6% of the Gambian population, many Gambians know some Wollof beside their mother tongue. The reason for this might be that the Wollofs’ were recruited to Civil Service during the colonial era and constitutes half of the population in the capital Banjul (Tomkinson 1987:38ff). In Bundung Church everything in the Church Service is translated from Mandinka or Wollof to English or the other way round.

Since Omar is educated (secondary school), he speaks English. He is privileged to have education - the rate of literacy is not high in the Gambia. Only 25 % of the population can read and write. To gain education at university level, a Gambian has to study abroad - there has not been any university in the Gambia.

I met Omar just a few times, and carried out the interview after a Sunday-Service. He was not confident with me categorising myself as non-religious. He felt insecure because he did not know “what spirit was behind me”, but still wanted to give me his “testimony”. The interview was carried out in English and is quite short. Omar was 26 years old, not married and had no children at the time of the interview. In the following I will present:

I: Would you tell me what beliefs and attitudes towards life that dominated your life before

you became a Christian?

Omar: I was praying five times a day, was meditating to get higher knowledge of Islam. I believed I was on the right way. I was relaxed. I didn't feel guilty of anything. I felt righteous.

I: Can you remember any particular event or person that played important parts in your decision to become a Christian?

Omar: I was about 20 years old and was teaching a white man, a missionary, Wollof. He made me trust tubab's (= white people). The time I trusted him I really was reading the Bible. He was generous and really ready to help. In all his action he really was successful. If he predict something about my life, I would see it. I saw it as human knowledge. I knew tubabs' could be very wise to play tricks with you. That was general ideas everyone had.

In qoranic school they thought me the history of the prophets - but not all. The Bible drew me to religion. Islam at first. I was the only son of my mother. She would give me something for protection. I would take it off or I would loose it - it disappeared. I was more interested in it after reading the Bible. The Bible really confused me at the beginning. It forced me to search for God. I really loved to read the four gospels. It created a picture of Jesus Christ, and I fell in love with him. If I believe this man in every way, there will be no harm. I read the Bible for 1 year and 6 months. I wanted to get rid of my habits. I knew if I became a Christian I would have help. I started to put Jesus higher than Mohammed. I took a decision. Got baptised in Baptist mission Church.

I: How would you describe the first period of time after you made the decision to become a Christian? Were there any major changes in your life-style or psychological state?

Omar: That time I got really problems. I stopped my work with the missionaries. People would not believe my testimony if I work with white people - they would think it was because of money. My family rejected me because of my conversion. I didn't have peace with Muslims or Christians, since I was a new Christian. I didn't understand the

interaction after the preaching. So I left for Ghana town Church. It was very tough there too. My sister, Marabou`s - everybody tried to convert me back again. They told me I didn't know enough to decide to be a Christian. You can know God in a special way, not only by reading books. They were persuading me. Discussing. Telling me some verses in the Bible where Christians were wrong. Then I started to meditate. To purify your soul. For one year I was calling myself Muslim again. But a different Muslim. The knowledge I speak was from the Bible."

Omar talks about his period before he became a Christian in a positive way: *"I believed I was on the right way. I was relaxed"*. When he had been in contact with the Bible for a while, he got concerned to get help to get rid of bad habits. He does not exemplify what behaviour he was thinking about as "bad habits". It seems like he did not see his behaviour as bad habits before he got in touch with the missionary and started to read the Bible. At least he says: *"I didn't feel guilty of anything. I felt righteous"*, when he talks about the time before this contact.

Omar describe his movement to Christianity as a long process that ended in a decision to get baptised. As the only son of his mother, she gave him things that were seen within traditional religion as protecting objects (ju-jus). Omar was not particularly interested in these ju-jus', but at the time he started reading the Bible he says he was more interested in them than before. He also says about Jesus *"if I believe this man in every way, there will be no harm"*. I interpret these statements as Omar for some reasons became more occupied with protection than he was before, and that he started to believe that Jesus could offer stronger protection than traditional practices.

Omar says that the Bible drew him towards religion, but still he connects his Bible-reading with the process of gaining trust in the white missionary that he was teaching Wollof. He describes the man as generous, successful and ready to help. It is very important for Omar that no one should think that he converted for money. The emphasis he makes on clarifying this issue, I think, indicates that this mixture of religious and "developing" work from white people is not an easy one when connected to the history of the British colonisation. As I mentioned in the introduction, the missions operating in the Gambia today have to evangelise not only through words but also through deeds in the form of "aid" - if they want to stay in the country.

Omar called himself a Muslim for one year's time after he was baptised as a Christian. This was

due to what he perceived as persuasion from his Muslim family. Still, he thinks the conversion to Christianity “lasted” through this period. He stresses that he just called himself a Muslim again, “*but a different Muslim. The knowledge I speak was from the Bible*”.

Babokar

Babokar is a Jola, a group that constitutes 10,6% of the Gambian population (1993-census). The group is said to have inhabited the area from ancient times - at least prior to the migration era in Africa (Tomkinson 1987:38ff). Like Omar, Babokar speaks several languages in addition to his mother tongue: Wolof, Mandinka and English. Like Omar, he is also educated (high school and technical training).

Babokar tells me that when he was a Muslim he was also worshipping idols, wearing ju-ju’s, drinking medicine to make the skin strong against knives - what is normally labelled “traditional” religious practise by my informants. As I discuss in the introductory chapter, such blended practices are said to be quite common among Muslims.

Babokar was 29 years old, unmarried and held a leading position within ECG at the time of the interview. I met him twice for interviews, and only on few occasions apart from those. During the interviews he asked some friends to join us, maybe to avoid gossip. The interview was made in English. The following is extract of the conversation:

“I: Would you tell me what beliefs and attitudes towards life that dominated you before you became a Christian?”

Babokar: Before I was a Muslim. I was circumcised. I was worshipping idols (wood-figures). It has power. I didn’t know that time that they were evil. Actually in the back of my head, I knew that they were not right. You could not visit those places during night. Actually I was scared. I knew a lot of Islam. I was proud of my religion. I did not know about Christianity. I was not happy with any other religion than Islam. I used jujus. My mother was unfortunate with her sons. They died. When she got older she was lucky to get me. I drank things. I even drank medicine to make my skin strong against knives. He (the marabou?) checked with a knife and it did not penetrate my skin. Few days later I cut myself though by accident in the same arm, so the protection didn’t last for long.

I've seen people putting cloth upon a bottle with water, turn it round and the water doesn't spoil. I've seen people turning sticks to snakes. By eight O'clock fire would be seen in silk cotton trees. Demons were living under them. Huge trees. Demons could also live in a river or in a human being. Only place it can not live is in the presence of God. I saw this powers working on others. I wanted to see if I also could get them. Are they reliable, something to depend on? That was my question.

I: How did this influence your emotions and your actions in life?

Babokar: I don't priories people. I was proud. To come and influence me was impossible. Even though I didn't have much education. I was very self-sufficient.

I: Can you remember any particular event or person that played important parts in your decision to become a Christian?

Babokar: In primary school I was introduced to the Bible. What encouraged me to read were the stories of the good boys, like Daniel and Joseph. When I became a Christian it was few people present - just some friends from school, some Christian. I saw an emptiness in my life. They were talking about salvation from sin in school. I just started crying. I prayed and invited Jesus into my heart. I was never the same again. All the lack of peace I used to have was gone. It just disappeared. But it took me time to know about Jesus. The doubts didn't disappear like that.

I: How would you describe the first period of time after you made the decision to become a Christian? Was there any major changes?

Babokar: I used to be lazy. I used to like women very much. I used to be troublesome. I left myself to do anything I wanted to do. I didn't have hope, no one to help me other than my parents. When I became a Christian I totally changed. I started loving people in a different way. I went to my mother and said that now I've found my answer. She cried. I went back to school and prayed. A couple of months later, I came back and she agreed to return all the stuff from the marabouts. I used to be unhealthy, coughing a lot. Now I was healthy.

She could not believe that I was really under protection of Jesus. She used to feel on my body to check whether I wasn't wearing ju-jus. This was about ten years back. It took three years before I was baptised."

Babokar does not explain how he first got to know about ECG, but he explains why he did not join the Catholic Church:

"It was a Catholic Church at the place I lived. But they could do everything they wanted to. It could not relieve me from my doubts and fears, which were my needs. We are not different from other Protestant Churches. But we are different from the catholic. God's plan for me now is to be here. maybe later I could be used in a different Church. Many members have moved to other Churches to be a blessing there."

"Biblical" is a word Babokar like to use when I ask him to characterise ECG. Everything that is beside the Bible, they do not like, he says. But what then does he conceive as biblical? Do not the words in the Bible need to be interpreted? To this he responds:

"God used the writers of the Bible through inspiration according to their culture and language. You need the Holy Spirit to understand. God can communicate to someone even without any knowledge. Education is not at the forefront, but it is still important. God wants to use everyone."

In this story, I think there are examples of changing the statements about the past to create conformity between the present and the past. Like when Babokar says: *"I did not know that time that they (idols) were evil. Actually in the back of my head, I knew.... Actually I was scared"*. The rest of the story gives a quite positive image of Babokar's past as a Muslim; *"I knew a lot of Islam...I was proud of my religion..I was not happy with any other religion than Islam."* When Babokar describes the conversion-moment, he refers to a feeling of emptiness and lack of peace for the first time. He also says that what struck him in school, was preaching about salvation from sin. It seems Babokar, like for Omar, linked the awareness of sin and bad habits to the period when they came in contact with Christians but prior to the conversion.

Babokar describes himself as a person who is preoccupied with spiritual powers that could *"protect and be reliable"*. This he links to the fact that he was the only surviving son of his

mother. He emphasises that he was preoccupied with the stories in the Bible about Daniel and Joseph - men who were used by God to do miracles.

Moudou

Moudou gave me his address at the first meeting I attended. I hesitated to go to his place without company, but finally we met in the street and made an appointment. This turned out to be a friendship. As I have explained earlier, the following story was told during a visit and is thus not an interview.

Moudou is a Ghanaian of the ethnic group Gonja. This is a group that mainly resides in the north of Ghana, and which primarily consist of Muslims. Ghana has much higher numbers of Christians than the Gambia; approximately 42 % of the population regard themselves as Christians, according to information on Internet⁷. The literacy-rate is also higher: 76% of males and 54% of females (1995 - UNESCO). Moudou is educated in sports at University and is thus one of very few in his generation to get higher education. He has been married, but is now divorced. He has two children from this marriage. After the divorce, he came to the Gambia to work as a teacher. He was a Muslim until he converted to Christianity at the age of 24. By the time of the fieldwork he was 32 years old. In Omega he serves as one out of several praise and worship-leaders.

“Moudou: From I was a child I just hated polygamy. My mum and dad always lived peacefully together. I never saw them quarrel. He even cooked for the whole compound. When I was about 12, the relatives - especially my aunt - started to influence my dad, saying that he made my mum stubborn and that he spoiled her. They advised him to marry a second wife. So after a while he did. I saw my mother hurt for the first time. I really felt it. He was away for long periods with this other lady. Even when mum was sick, he didn't come.

I was a really fanatic Muslim. I used to get information from Arabic countries, quoting the Bible and explaining that the Christians were not interpreting it right. Finding verses in

⁷ <http://www.tcol.co.uk/ghana/ghan2.htm#society>

the Old Testament prophesising Mohammed. Discussing with Christians a lot. Many Muslims had a very bad attitude towards Christians and didn't want anything to do with them. I wanted to be open, to meet them and to learn what they stood for. My elder brother was a Christian before me, and said that I should not be as ignorant and closed as the others. When he became a Christian my father didn't mind too much. He said our ancestors turned from tradition to Islam, so if he want to turn from Islam to Christianity, why should he trouble him. Some relatives were not happy about it though. They said he is your child, it's not good for your children to turn away from Islam.

I was training so many children and youngsters in sports. They were so found of me, and the parents were grateful. After a while - trough my discussions with Christians I was learning more about the Bible. I asked to have one and started to read. I found the stories more interesting than those in the Koran, because they were full stories. Not like in the Koran where only parts of the stories are written. It was difficult to understand Arabic. I learned how to say it by heart, but not to interpret it. But I got English translation of it though. I also started admiring the Christians way of living. The togetherness. The peacefulness. They didn't gossip so much. They had only one wife. There was not so much trouble among them as with the Muslims. It was hard for me to admit that I was becoming a Christian. It took a long time before I accepted it. I was doing it alone in prayer. In the beginning I was hiding. Didn't go to Church. But one Sunday I decided that I was going to Church. I dressed up. Took my Bible in my hands and walked through the streets with it openly. People just looked at me. Some of my friends rejected me when they knew about it. Some parents told their kids not to come to me again. But they never listened to their parents - they came anyway.

I: Did you ever think that those problems among Muslims you saw could be solved in another way than through religion?

Moudou: No! Religion is so important in this Africa."

On the one hand he speaks of the conversion as a long process: "It was hard for me to admit that I was becoming a Christian..." On the other he says that he became a Christian while he prayed

alone, ergo a concrete act linked to a particular moment. I think this is a paradox regarding conversion he is not alone to express, a paradox consisting of the view of conversion as an individual choice/ action and of conversion as a process.

Moudou had a brother who became a Christian before him, and who had put their father's reaction towards converting to test, and had succeeded. Still he experienced hardships when he openly signalled (walking with the Bible in his hands) that he had changed affiliation.

The motivation Moudou draws out as important for him to orient himself towards Christianity seems to be of two different kinds. One is an interest in the Bible. He finds the stories in the Bible more interesting because he finds them richer than in the Koran ("full stories" contra "parts of stories").

The second motivation seems to be of a social nature. Moudou is concerned about how life is best lived in a community. However, he links this concern to a painful experience when he was still a child. He thinks his father neglected his mother after taking a second wife, and he links this experience to Muslim practice of polygamy. In Moudou's eyes the father was influenced and even pressed to take a second wife. In that way he directs his anger not primarily to his father, but to the religious society of Islam which his relatives were part of. He also points out that the Christians did not gossip as much as the Muslims.

When Moudou came to the Gambia he was attracted by the "biblical" approach in ECG. He says:

"My brother was here before me. He said: - if you really want to learn more about the Bible - go to this Church. When I do something I want to know all there is to know. What I like about the Church is that you really learn more about the Bible there."

The brother is mentioned both in relation to Moudou's change of attitude towards Christianity and in relation to his decision to join ECG.

Melanie

Melanie was also someone I got to know in the ladies'-meetings. She was very eager to know why I was interested in the Church when I was not a Christian. I had to explain to her the reasons

why I “lost my belief”.

Melanie is a 44 years old Sierra Leonean with a masters degree from University. I do not know what languages she speaks or what part of the country she lived in during her childhood. She is unmarried and has no children. She neither speaks loudly, nor fast. It seems she gives much thought to whatever she says and presents it in a calm and clear way that makes people listen to her. In ECG Melanie is in charge of the youths and is also part of the leader-team in Omega local Church. This is Melanie’s story:

“I: Would you tell me what beliefs and attitudes toward life that dominated your life before you became a Christian?”

Melanie: I was brought up to be a Christian. I used to go to Church - in fact my parents said I would not go any other place during the week if I didn’t go to Church on Sundays. But I did not get anything out of it personally. It became just a habit.

I: How did this influence your emotions and your actions?”

Melanie: I was very shy and quiet as a child. People often took no notice of me. I went to a good school and was doing very well though. But I was often depressed. It was not so serious that I should have been treated in a hospital, but still it was affecting me. I was not very close to my mother. We did not talk about it. Maybe they saw it as moods. It bothered me that my parents were not married. It was a stigma. Every time I was asked about my parents’ name, and had to tell different surnames, I felt it. It was not before I became an adult that I was able to forgive them for that.

I: Can you remember any particular event or persons that played important parts in your decision to become a Christian?”

Melanie: I went to university and got in touch with some students that had Bible-study-groups. There was a chapel at campus also. I went there because I didn’t know what else to spend my time on. That time I did not see any meaning with life. The thought of death as the final end, that nothing would be left of me - I could not cope with that. I think I would

have committed suicide if I didn't become a Christian. I started to pray in another way, started to try and get something out of it. I was about 19 years old. I expected answers to my prayers. I would pray before I started reading, to be more effective. Prayed to be able to meet deadlines and challenges in my studies. I think it worked.

I: How would you describe the first period of time after you made the decision to become a Christian? Were there any major changes in your life-style or psychological state?

Melanie: I started to feel important before God in a new way. I could sacrifice everything for that life. I didn't have too much fear and uncertainty anymore. Life started having meaning. Over time I came to accept that God is! I cannot cope with life on my own. I need help. I am very content to put major control into Gods hands. I really believe he will take care of me. If there is a time for leaving a job, I'll do so even if I don't have a new one. I know that God provides."

Melanie goes on to say that she left one teaching-job at the end of the contract, and applied for new ones. The first application in this direction was not successful. "*God didn't want it for me*", she says. Then she saw another ad in a newspaper. She sent an application for the job that was advertised, and another application in connection with a project she herself dreamed of that was not advertised. Few days later she was called for an interview and was later offered the job that was never advertised. She says: "*That's why I was turned down at the teacher-job.... There might be coincidences, but I don't want to call everything that happens coincidence. I believe spiritual matters are very important.*" Here we can see similarities to Sarah's way of thinking. Melanie also wants to trust that God has control in her life. As soon as something happens which she is able to capitalise on to reinterpret an experience as good for something, she draws the connections.

Melanie is concerned with existential questions. She talks about the meaningless of her life before her conversion. Her relationship with her mother is connected to her depressed state of mind - the mother did not see her or understood how bad she felt. The conversion is described as a process; "*I started to..Life started to... Over time I came to accept.*" Melanie express that the conversion changed her inner life, made her less uncertain and fearful, gave her the feeling that she was important and that someone (God) cared for her. Then she turns to describe her

relationship with God today, as to explain and justify her decision to convert. In the story of her application for a job that she did not get, we clearly see how Melanie interprets happenings in her life with references to God's will.

When Melanie came to the Gambia, she first visited a Pentecostal Church. She decided to visit a Church Service at ECG, without knowing any of the members who attended the Church. She had visited evangelical Churches before, but the one she was attached to after her conversion was Anglican. After the ECG-Service she decided to stay:

“I had an inner conviction that there were the Church I should be in. I felt comfortable there. Felt that I belonged there. That I fitted in. I didn't know people...Evangelical just means active, out-reaching fellowships, where the whole Bible is taken as an authority. Other Churches in the Gambia are different, but not necessarily better or worse.”

Sarah

Sarah is a Sierra Leonean who identify herself as a “Mende” when ethnicity is concerned. Her mother tongue is thus Mende, but speaks English and Aku (Krio) as well. English is the national language in Sierra Leone, but is spoken only by the literate minority. About 30% of the population have Mende as their mother tongue, while most people in the country understand Aku⁸.

The literacy rate⁹ in Sierra Leone was in 1995 only 18% for women. Sarah has 5 years of education at high school and 3 years in collage. At the time of the interview she worked as a teacher in a nursery school. She came to the Gambia alone with her child due to the political instability in her country. The husband was still a student in Sierra Leone, and he had some years left. At the time of the interview she was 35 years and lived with her nuclear family in a house with living room, kitchen and bedroom. She was helped in the house by a young maid she had hired for some hours per day.

In the interview Sarah mentions that she was circumcised at the age of ten or eleven. According

⁸ <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/sl.html#intro>

⁹ defined as age 15 and over who can read and write in English, Mende, Temne or Arabic.

to Koso-Thomas (1987) 90 % of the female population in Sierra Leone is circumcised - and most ethnic groups' practice "excision"¹⁰. The circumcision is effected in connection with a period of training for the girls to be initiated into adulthood. There are different reports on reasons people give for this practice, from aesthetics to control over women's sexuality (Skramstad 1990). The headwoman of such initiating institutions (secret societies) is considered to have knowledge about other kinds of surgical operations and about local herbs. She is also supposed to have mystical powers. Sarah says her grandmother was a "big member" in the secret society. I am not sure whether this means a headwoman or one of her assistants. As I understand only high-ranked women are chosen to attend the initiating ritual. Maybe there is a connection between this position and the fact that Sarah is one of the few woman of her generation that got higher education.

I met Sarah once every week in "Ladies' meetings". She was also one of my roommates in the Easter-conference, and we had a friendly relationship. The interview was taken in her home the day before I left the Gambia, and was tape-recorded. Because I was recording the interview she used a more formal language than normal. During the interview some children were visiting and they interrupted quite often. She asked me to turn the record player off, whenever she spoke to the children or to the maid. The interview-transcription fills twelve pages. I have picked out some parts which I quote, the rest I summarise with my own words.

In Omega Church, Sarah is the accountant and the leader of the children, and is thus attending leader meetings. Sarah's parents were "actively practising" Muslims, and she stayed with her Muslim aunt from the age of 4. However she says she was too young to know anything about religion that time:

"I never became a Muslim because for me, I think when I was 4 years old, I was staying with my aunty in another place, and I did not practise Muslim there. And even though they were Muslims, but I was not a Muslim, I was not fasting because I was small - I don't even know what they were doing. So I went back to my home. I started going to school. At the age of ten I - our school was a catholic school - so I attended a baptismal-class and I was

¹⁰ Clitoridectomy: removal of the prepuce (foreskin) of the clitoris. Excision: removal of the prepuce, the clitoris and all or part of the labia minora. (Koso-Thomas 1987)

baptised. So I became a Christian.” “I was not going with the crowd because I not wanted to be a Muslim. Because we are not forced in our school. They ask us those that want to be a Christian. Then we start going to the baptismal classes to learn your catechism. They tell you about Jesus. But that time they were not reading the Bible to us. We just have the book, the prayers and the questions. So we attend the class. That time I didn’t even give my life to Christ, because I was just a child, and they didn’t tell us much about the Bible or even about Christ, they just make us as Christians.”

At this point in life, Sarah was staying with relatives who were Catholics, and in addition to the school she attended, she had to participate in Catholic Church Service every Sunday. Besides she was not much in contact with the beliefs of her tradition, though her grandmother was a “big member” in the secret women society. Even though Sarah got circumcised, because it was tradition to initiate girls by the age of ten or eleven into the women’s society, yet she was young and didn’t know much about it. Now, she will not allow her own daughter to be circumcised, and she will not accept to take active part in initiation rituals like her grandmother did. The reason she gives for this attitude is that she has learned in the Bible that men should be circumcised, but not women. The rest of the celebrations, the dancing and the parties, she wouldn’t mind joining though. At the same age her father also wanted her to marry a chief who had more than fifty wives. It was the culture of her tribe, she says, to marry 10-year old girls to someone, but they will not go and stay with the husbands until they are grown-ups. *“I said I didn’t want to be married to the chief, and even the man himself saw that I was clever and allowed me to go to school instead.”* Since then she was never asked to marry someone without her consent. Later she got married to her friend from college.

“Sarah: The time it became really personal for me? 1985. Yes... Even though that time before 1985 I was a catholic, I even wanted to become a nun. So I went for the training for 2 ½ years, but I feel that life was not for me. Because I didn’t feel God was calling me to become a religious nun. So I have to leave. So I left 1983 (age 22), I went back home - It was here in the Gambia - I was in the Gambia here... I was still a Catholic. I was going to Catholic Church. Then from there I started attending crusades like from the Assemblies of God - I went there.

I: Crusades - what did they?

Sarah: They are talking like.. they go, they gather a crowd, they talk about Jesus. They will preach, then they will ask people to receive Christ as their personal saviour. But still I didn't really know what they were talking about until 1985. 1985 when I went to collage. I went to collage 1985. There were two groups there: the Catholic group and the Scripture Union group. It was there I met my husband. So we were friends. So one time it was this "SLEVIS": Sierra Leonean Evangelical Students. Every long back in July they meet and they will have seminar for one week, were they talk about Christ, we talk about the Christian life, how to receive Christ in your life - so by that time I received Christ as my personal saviour. So from there now I forgot about all the boyfriends I was having. So I decided not to have any boyfriend until I was married. So that was how I accepted Christ as my saviour. Until that time I started living a life: I go to Church, I read my Bible.. 1989 I got married. In fact, when I was forgetting my sins, I was a part of the Catholic Church."

"I: Was there any major change in your emotions or your actions that time when you became a Christian?

Sarah: When I became a Christian? Yes, it was a grate change. Before I received Christ, I was somebody hot tempered - jealousy, hatred - if somebody does you something wrong, I would just say I will not forgive you. When I came to know Christ I surrender all those things. I asked God to take it, to take control of me, to give me patience.

I: Are all those things gone, or are you still struggling with it?

Sarah: They are gone, like hatred.. forgiveness now. Even though it is difficult, because even though you are a believer, you are a born-again, it's very difficult to forgive. It's just by the grace of God, that help you to forgive people. Especially those that hurt you, that do something to you that you don't like."

Sarah also emphasises that the focus ECG gives to the Bible is entirely different from the Catholic Churches she attended:

“In fact in the Catholic we do not read the Bible as we do in the evangelical Church. In the Catholic they have a special book for their Services, we call it missal...That’s were they read all their gospels from...So they don’t have to go to the Bible. ..In fact when I was in Catholic Church I didn’t even know much about the Bible. Because we never have something like Bible-studies.”

She mentions other differences between ECG and Catholic Churches too:

“Like in Catholic Church, all prayers are taken from the book. Here we don’ pray holding books. We just pray as the spirit leads.... like the way that I feel the Service is here, it’s not the same because, (there) most of the things would go systematically, everything is from the book.”

But it was a particular conflict that led to her separation from the Catholic Church in Sierra Leone. Her fiancé was a united Methodist. If they married in the Catholic Church, the Church would insist that their future children should attend the Catholic Church. Sarah disagreed with this demand, since her husband was a Methodist and also because she did not want to make any commitments. They married in the united Methodist Church and Sarah became a member there. When Sarah migrated to the Gambia for the second time, she only knew the Catholic Church she was attending during her first stay in the Gambia (when training to become a nun). She went to this Church again, but she says it did not satisfy her.

When she met another Sierra Leonian (Melanie), she got to know about ECG. Although Sarah was baptised in the Catholic Church, she got herself baptised again because she wanted to be baptised by emersion.

Sarah experienced difficulties during her last pregnancy. She was hospitalised because of very high blood pressure. Her child was born in the seventh month of pregnancy and did not survive. Instead of accusing God for letting her child die, she is - at the time of the interview - able to be grateful to God when she thinks back of the experience: *“So all the same I just trust the Lord that the Lord cares for me. That was not my time to die. So he delivered me from that.”*

When she was hospitalised, Sarah was alone with her child in the Gambia. This was a difficult situation for her also economically. She said that she had lost her job and had to sell all her

furniture to pay the hospital-bills. She did not have any family to help her out of the economical problem, and to take care of her daughter. In this situation she received help from ECG. They provided food for her in the hospital. When she came out from hospital, the Church let her stay in a house it possesses and one of the members' gave her a half bag of rice every month. Sarah calls this lady her best friend, and is very grateful to both her and the Church for the help she received. At the same time she concludes this story with *“So I really thank God that that was the hand of God. So, my relationship with God... Everything I do he is first. My husband is not first, or my parents. God is number one. Yes!”*

But Sarah admits that sometimes, when something unexpected happens, like someone you love dies suddenly, she uses to think; *“why did God allow this to happen?”* Such incidents put ones faith to a test, she says, and further: *“if your faith is weak you will fall, but if you keep trusting..”*

By reasoning this way, Sarah does not separate between material, social and psychological help - because God is the master of it all. If she receives material help or support from other people, she sees them as a kind of “messenger” from God. Somehow it was God who made sure she got what was good for her.

She explains trust by the words patience and acceptance. Patience to wait and see what will come out of that situation - maybe all will turn to the best. Acceptance for happenings in her life which she do not understand is good for her. In any case God has a plan for everything that happens.

It seems to me that Sarah was not satisfied with the social and religious life in the Catholic Church. She left her training to become a nun. Thereby she had taken steps to change the direction of her life. In this story, the conversion seems to have two steps: first she says she got a personal relationship with God, and then she chose to be a part of Protestant groups instead of the Catholic Church, and got baptised for a second time. Her acquaintance with her future husband was merged factors that have created what she describes as a major turning point in life. From that point she changed her life-style; she stopped having boyfriends, she started reading the Bible, went to Church, prayed to get more patience - and waited to get married. Sarah's “conversion” then implied simultaneous changes in her life. She decided not to be a nun, she decided who should be her companion in life, she started a new education - all these changes she

links to her conversion.

4.2 COMPARING THE INTERVIEWS

As I have explained earlier, only Moudou's story was not initiated by me. The other informants' reflections were given in interviews where I participated actively in setting the agenda by asking them questions. I think the interviews are comparable with the narrative, though.

Notwithstanding the dangers of excessing simplification of my data, I will try to compare some of the experiences the informants bring forth when explaining how they oriented themselves towards Protestant Christianity. I will analyse what they report as the context for their conversion and if they present the conversion as an incident that created continuity or discontinuity in their life. I will also make efforts to compare what changes they report when it comes to behaviour and psychological condition after their "conversion".

Experiences connected to conversion

Both Omar and Babokar tell me that they were the only (living) sons of their mothers, and the mothers were occupied with protecting them with means of for instance ju-ju's. I think both of them express that they were occupied with obtaining protection at the time they came in contact with the Bible and Christians. While Omar does not tell about any concrete situation that initiated his doubts in the protection "traditional religion" offered, Babokar mentions cutting himself with a knife the day after a visit to a "Marabou" as an experience that made him doubt if "traditional" means of protection were really something to trust.

Moudou connects his religious reorientation to the painful experience of seeing his mother neglected by the father after he married his second wife. Moudou thinks the father was almost forced to take a second wife, and that he himself would have been put under the same pressure if he had not joined a different religious community.

Sarah's story is complicated. How I see it, Sarah says her intellectual capacity was what rescued her from the fate of being one of fifty wives of a chief (which she herself did not want). After having got some education, she decided to attend a training course to become a nun. After a time she felt that being a nun was not the way she wanted to live, and rather decided to take higher

education. At this point of time she met Protestant Christians and fell in love with her future husband (who was a part of this group of Christians) - at the same time.

When describing her religious movement, Melanie brings forth a feeling of stigma because her parents were not married, and that she suffered from depression in her childhood. For her it was important to be evaluated in a new way - she needed to be appreciated.

Introduced to Protestant Christianity

When it comes to the situations in which the informants were introduced to Protestant Christianity I think we can find more similarities. Moudou, Sarah and Melanie all came in contact with Protestant Christians during their education. Moudou mentions that he was introduced to the Bible in primary school, but dates the conversion ten years later. He must have been around 19 years old at that time. He was still studying: *“when I became a Christian it was few people present - just some friends from school, some Christians”*. Sarah’s conversion occurred when she joined a group of evangelical students in college. Whilst Melanie’s conversion happened when she joined a Bible study group at University.

Omar is the only one that mentions contact with a white missionary as an important factor for his starting to read the Bible. Moudou also stands out from this picture as he mentions his Christian brother and Christian friends as important in his reorientation. He does not say whether these friends were people he studied with at University, though. However, at the time he became a Christian he had finished his education.

Needs and changes

Omar, Babokar and Sarah mention that they got help in getting rid of “bad habits” when they converted. As I have pointed out, this concept of “bad habits” comes into the stories/ replies of my informants when they are talking about the time they got in touch with Protestants. I think that they might not have been preoccupied with these issues before they started to read the Bible and talk with Protestants, but this should not be seen as a fact, rather as a hypothesis based on my account.

Omar does not specify what he means by bad habits. Babokar points out laziness, womanising, and troublemaking as the “habits” he used to have. Sarah mention that she was hot tempered,

jealous and full of hate. She also mentions having boyfriends as something she viewed as bad when she converted.

Again both Babokar and Sarah also say that they developed a new way of conducting themselves to other people after the conversion. Babokar says he started to love people in a different way, while Sarah says she got help (and still are) from God to forgive people.

Melanie's on the other hand wanted to "get rid of" fear and uncertainty - she wanted to feel that life was meaningful and that she was important to someone. Babokar also mentions such an aspect when describing the changes that conversion brought forth for him: "*All the lack of peace I used to have was gone*". In another part of the interview he says that: "*(the Catholic Church) could not relieve me from my doubts and fears, which were my needs*".

Moudou does not mention such changes in his inner life, or in his behaviour toward other people after the conversion. This might be the result of the different "narrative event" (Bauman 1986), situation or setting in which the story was told, compared to the others. However, I do not think this is the reason why. I saw Moudou in many situations, but I never heard him speak about such self-transformation. I do not claim that he never experienced such transformations, but if he did he chose not to present his religious reorientation in those terms. He presented himself as someone who consciously chose a different religious community which he thought was functioning better - at least for him.

Process and decision

All my informants presented their "conversion" both as a long process, and as a decision made in one moment in time. They presented the reading of the Bible as central for their reorientation.

Omar describes his reorientation as a process where he gained trust in the white missionary, started to read the Bible, got confused, searched for God, started to believe more in Jesus than in Mohammed, and took a decision to get baptised. Babokar also mentions reading the Bible before he prayed and invited Jesus into his heart, ergo a conscious act. He says that he totally changed when he became a Christian, but also that it took time to know about Jesus.

Moudou got attracted to the Bible, which he found more interesting to read than the Koran. He too described becoming a Christian as both a process, and a conscious act in a particular moment

in time (*“hard for me to admit that I was becoming a Christian ..I was doing it alone in prayer”*).

Sarah said she *“received Jesus as her personal saviour”* at a seminar with evangelical students. She asked God to *“take control over”* her. I believe that when she said she changed after she received Jesus, she was talking about the result of this effort to leave problems for God to handle. This thought of God taking control of situations makes her more patient. I do not think she meant that she as a human being suddenly changed personality, but that she found a way to handle life that made a difference also in the way she approached others. In her story, it seemed like she had a personal relationship to God also prior to her conversion. Her explanation for leaving the training as a nun two years before she converted is that she did not feel God was calling her to become a religious nun. This could of course also be her way of saying that she did not feel comfortable with the training course, with words she was fond of using in her present life.

Melanie stresses on the process; she *started* to pray in a different way, she *started* to try to get something from it. She also *started* to feel important before God and *over time* she came to accept that God exists.

Reactions from the environment

Those who were Muslims before converting to Protestant Christianity talk about difficulties they had with their social environment, as a result of the conversion. Omar speaks about his family’s serious efforts to persuade him to return to Islam again, efforts that partly succeeded in that he called himself a Muslim again for one year. Babokar says that his mother cried when he told her about his conversion. In another part of the interview he also says that: *“The Muslims asked me not to go to Church anymore”*. Moudou tells that his relatives put pressure on his father to make him hinder the son’s change of affiliation. Some of Moudou’s friends also rejected him and some parents of the children he was teaching tried to stop the children coming to him.

Sarah and Melanie who converted from Catholicism did not mention such traumatic experiences.

4.3 CONVERSION-ACCOUNTS IN RELATION TO THE CHURCH

My description in chapter two on how the interviews were carried out, and on the relationship between me and my informants, was one effort to contextualise the interviews. Now I would like to take a look at how the interaction in Church-gatherings and sanctions in the Church community in general could be seen as context for the interviews, that is what way the interviews could be seen as reflecting or opposing such sanctions. Sanction can be both positive and negative, meaning response which works as reward and response which works as punishment. My impression is that the social network the Church provides, is quite important for the members who are immigrants to the Gambia, as Sarah expresses when she talks about her illness during her last pregnancy. It might be that opposition to the leadership is either avoided or de-emphasised in the interviews, or that the informants simply has incorporated the ideas communicated by the sanctions.

Being “serious”

In the Membership Application Form for ECG those who desire membership in the Church had to answer several questions concerning their conversion. I quote:

“1) Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour?, 2) When did you make that decision (date)?, 3) Where?, 4) Who helped you make that decision? and 5) Have you been baptised in the Lord Jesus Christ since you believed? When (date)?”

To view the conversion as a decision made in a particular point in time could then be seen as something close to a requirement for membership within ECG. What process that led to this decision is not asked for though. However, the fact that my questions about beliefs and attitudes prior to the conversion brought about reflections on the process of religious reorientation, could be seen as a sign that my informants where not unfamiliar with making such connections.

It is striking that none of these stories about this personal processes include improvement of economical status or raising the chances of having a job as factors of importance for converting. I have reason to believe that those members who were regarded as converts for material purposes only, soon vanished from ECG. The president of ECG said:

“ Help and the word go together, but we do not encourage people to come to the Church to search for physical needs. Some do that...In our local Church we have a needy-fond made up from offer once a month. We distribute only to those members who have proved to be serious. We also provide clothes from other members. We think it’s better with gifts from us than from Europe - they are more appreciated.”

This statement was followed by four stories of persons who had been in contact with the Church and proved not to be “serious”. Lack of humility and reluctance to submit under discipline are conceived as signs of not being serious. Two stories was about the Church-leaders suspecting a member of swindle against other members or the administration of the Church. When these suspects disappeared from Church, it was seen as a sign of guilt. I will come back to the concept of discipline below.

Another feature in the interviews that is striking is that “traditional” religion is presented as opposed to Protestant Christianity. Here too we can see that the members interviewed are in line with how the president of ECG spoke about “traditional” religion as referred to in the introduction.

Positions and discipline

As you have probably noticed, Babokar, Moudou, Sarah and Melanie all had various responsibilities and leader positions in the Church. This does not mean that they are “special” members of the Church whatsoever. Leader-responsibilities are to a large extent shared among a number of people. The president and pastors of ECG highlighted the importance that everyone found their “place” in the Church. That meant joining activities other than Sunday Services, and taking responsibility for practical or spiritual work in relation to the Church-community. Moudou criticised the request for every member to “find his/her place” in the Church. He thought some members should be allowed to just join the Church Service on Sundays and leave it with that. He did not make this opinion to the other Church-members, though.

Beside the pastors and elders in the Church, there were a lot of activities, groups and committees of which the members could join and take responsibility for a certain type of work or activity. In Omega Church there were one leader for the men and another for the women, since they had separate meetings once a week. The youths and the children also had their weekly separate

meetings, with several adults in charge. There were a prayer group with a leader, one accountant, a committee for planning a new Church building, a group of worship and praise leaders' etceteras. I have grounds to assert that being in such positions were almost synonymous to acceptance in the Church.

These positions were not given to every person who came to the Church. Richard had arrived from the States recently, where he had joined the Latter Day Saints (Mormons). He stayed with an uncle who also had immigrated to the Gambia. Richard was very keen on gaining responsibility in the Church. He was eager to respond if the preacher asked if someone could read some verses from the scripture for him. He also wanted to join the youth-meetings as a leader. That became a little more difficult than what he had thought. Here he talks about the conflict:

“They have stopped coming to me. I use to go to a bar and talk with some people there. I don't drink or smoke, I just like to go out and mingle with different kinds of people. They say that a Christian should not go to such places or mingle with people who live a sinful life. I tell them they are wrong. If you read the Bible you see that Jesus was together with sinners. People are of different calibre. I can be with you and be an example for you. I don't have to be influenced by you. They say I should not read the books I'm reading - that they are not good for me. Why shouldn't I? How many Church-members do you think go to clubs? It's many - I tell you. I used to attend the youth-meetings, but it seems like it's only one person who like to be in front all the time, to decide everything - and it's fine with me. I don't need to be a leader...But you know I stick to myself a bit since this discussion started. I talk with them and go to Church, but that's all.”

Richard's experience is an example on how a position was held back because the pastor was sceptical about his attitudes, moral standard and unwillingness to submit to the teachings in the Church.

Another story shows that being appointed to such a position is an acknowledgement that you live as a “good Christian”, that you are serious. When the pastor no longer regards a member as a good Christian, the one is “put under discipline” mainly by being asked to be discharged of his/her positions and responsibilities in the Church. One could believe that to be put under discipline meant doing penance by working extra hard for the Church, or in other ways show the

Lord that you are still his disciple. Rather, it is the opposite that happens. This is how Jacob experienced to be put under discipline:

Jacob's difficult choice

Jacob came to the Gambia to escape from the civil war in Liberia and was about 40 years old when I met him. He owned and managed a cloth-washing company, lived in a “modern” house with living room, kitchen, bedrooms, and bathroom - all under one roof. He hired a watchman and a boy who helped him with different things like cooking, cleaning and driving the car. Jacob had been a part of Omega Church for some years. He was the leader for the men's meeting and regarded as an elder in the Church when I arrived in the Gambia.

One Sunday in May after the Service he told me that his girlfriend - a white lady from England - was going to visit him. They had been together for some time, and he had also visited her and her family in England. She was going to stay in his house, he told me. They were not going to do anything “wrong”, but he wondered about where he would accommodate her if not in his flat. I asked him what the Church would say about the matter. He replied: *“They will surely not like it, but I'm prepared to defend it. You can not avoid being alone with a girl. Nothing needs to happen just because you are alone. Those who think that way are the very ones I would suspect is doing something wrong. If it was someone not experienced, I could understand that it would be strange to be under the same roof without being married. But one like me who are matured.. We are serious (he and the girlfriend), it's no need for us to mess it up.”*

Later we spoke on the phone: *“The Church says she can not stay at my place since we are not married. I don't know what to do”*. I asked him how important it was for him to stay in good terms with the Church, and what he thought about the matter himself. He said:

“I don't want to have any trouble with the Church. I don't want to have to make new friends. You don't know how they talk. They would say you were a fake, and spreading the rumour about you all over the place. I know it's right according to the Bible not to have sex with your girlfriend before you are married. I believe the Bible is Gods word and it is right for a Christian to follow God's word. It's hard for me not to touch my girlfriend. It's the only thing I find difficult to cope with. I have to admit that I sometimes lie to the

Church. They ask me all kinds of questions. If my girlfriend is a committed Christian. I say yes, but in fact she is not. They ask how our relationship was like before, were I met her etceteras. I use to say; “look, why are you asking me all these questions?” while I’m still smiling. What shall I do? The assistant pastor says that I should let her stay in a good Christian home, but I know she might not like it. To much noise of kids and they’ll like to involve her in prayers and Bible studies and different activities. Another possibility is to let her stay in my place, and I go to sleep with a friend during the night. But will she feel safe alone? Maybe I had to find a female friend to accompany her then. Who says that something wrong have to happen during the night? If we want to do something, we can do it any time of the day. But they say that other people might suspect - they will not understand. Maybe I should be with her for the first days alone, I don’t have to tell anybody that she’s here, my gate is always locked. What do you think?”

I found it difficult to give advice since I was not a Christian myself, and was scared that my role as researcher in the Church would be harmed if I gave advice on such controversial issues. However, I was sceptical to the idea of hiding the girlfriend, the house would be like a prison for her then. At some point the leaders would find out about it anyway and then it would look even stranger that he did not introduce her. I also suggested that he could marry the girlfriend, if it was so important for him to stay in good terms with the Church leaders. He replied that he had to think.

After Sunday Service, he invited me home. The girlfriend had arrived two days before. He told the assistant pastor the day after she came. The couple stayed in Jacob`s house. “*Where does it say that you can not stay under the same roof as your girlfriend? It only says that you should not have sex with her, doesn’t it? I’m not going to give so easily up on this!*” Jacob says. While I was sitting there, the assistant pastor came in. The couple was obviously not relaxed about the matter, and the ass. pastor looked worried. Still both parts adopted a joking approach. I left because I felt that my presence prevented them from speaking freely. I hoped they would find a solution to the matter.

On the 26th of May Jacob and his girlfriend visited me at my flat. Jacob told me that the other elders had asked him to step down from leadership. “*They don’t force you, but you know it’s like when you are asked to leave a job; if you refuse, you’ll be sacked anyway. So of course I said I’ll*

step down. They told me to come often to Church. I'm under discipline. It's not said, but that is what it is all about: you are supposed to come to Church to receive, but not to contribute."

The girlfriend: *"I've just unpacked again. It has been a difficult time. There is no room for tolerance in the Church. We could have lied and said we were married in England. It's just a piece of paper. It's the commitment that matters. Jacob had to choose between the Church and me - which wasn't a fair choice, really."* Still she seemed happy that Jacob did not "give in" to the pressure.

At one point in this process Jacob explained to me that the leaders had suggested that he was together with the girl because of money. He was extremely shocked and hurt, hardly able to speak - which was rather seldom with him. *"These Gambians, they always think that white people means money. How could they think such a thing about me? Am I that kind of person who would do that sort of thing?"* Also on her part it is hurting. Was it impossible that Jacob could simply be in love with her? Did they not regard her as loveable?

When I discussed Jacob's situation with the pastor of Omega Church, he explained that he thought it was negative for the Gambian society to be easy on marriage, the family structure was in disorder enough as it was. It caused children and grown ups vain and sorrow, and did not contribute the improvement of society. His disregard of the use of alcohol he also explained to me with reference to the social consequences. His ways of thinking seemed to be that of the Church as an alternative that should lead to a "better" (functioning) society. When preaching, however, the question of what was best for the society was not pointed out in this way.

Summary

That the informants whom I interviewed still remained in their positions I see as a sign that they were accepted and had not (yet?) ran into any difficulties with the other leaders. If a member is caught in an activity regarded as a sin, narratives of a personal relationship with God would not be enough to convince the leaders that the member in question is a "serious" Christian. Various motivations and processes of conversion are accepted as long as the motives are not said to be purely strategically.

My informants conversion accounts reflects the view in the Church of what it means to be

serious in the way that they do not describe the motives for converting as opportunistic. They also reflect a common understanding among the members and leaders of the Church of conversion as primarily a choice the individual has to take at a particular point in time.

The accounts are not characterised by the use of metaphors and similes that the preach in Sunday Services were marked by. The converts explain in a plain language what they think were their motivations to convert, and what changes they experienced. The stories differ a lot on this point. I think explanations of the reasons or incentives to convert, and what happened with oneself during the conversion, are important ingredients in the creation of meaning in relation to Christianity. That these explanations were so different I understand as signs that Christianity was meaningful for them in very different ways.

In the following chapter I will give an overview over some of the previous studies of conversion, and relate my focus and my discoveries to theirs.

Human beings use conventional narrative means to give shape to their experiences, and the experiences are to a certain extent constituted by the way they are told.
Marianne Gullestad

Experience is a private, and very largely speechless affair”
James Baldwin

5. CONVERSION, EXPERIENCE AND SPEECH

5.1 PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON CONVERSION

Here I present a short overview of two theoretical approaches that shape the discussion and analyses of conversion narratives, and discuss my empirical discoveries in relation to other studies. The first approach emphasises the socio-cultural context of the narratives draws on the works of Hefner (1993), Ifeka-Moller (1974) and partly Kipp (1995). The second is more concerned with the personal and emotional context of the narratives and reflects research made by Stai (1993) as well as Stromberg (1993). The two different approaches make impacts both on how conversion is defined, and some of the issues and hypothesis addressed in the respective researchers' work. The traditions among life-history researchers are to some extent similar to the ones among conversion-researchers. I will glimpse at a few of these researchers as well as they focus more explicitly on the relationship between speech and experience. I would like to argue that analytically a division between socio-cultural and personal contexts is not a matter of necessity. I view the accounts given to me in interviews and conversations both in relation to

experience, and in relation to how they reflect the socio-cultural context such as positive and negative sanctions in the Church-community and the situation in which the interviews took place (including the informants relationship to me as a researcher).

Studying varying phenomena?

The concept “conversion” is used in everyday speaking and frequently in Christian congregations. At the same time the concept is used in much of the literature concerning the phenomenological issues that people’s change of attachment to Churches or religion evoke. The definitions these researchers present on “conversion” are different and reflect both their interests to focus on one or several aspects of an empirical phenomenon and not to mention points of view towards methodological issues concerning the use of individual narratives.

The most important difference in definitions of conversion concerns the expression of an emotional experience as a requirement for - or a sign of - a conversion. As a student in religious science in Norway, Stai (1993) looks at the concept this way. He argues that conversion is a religious phenomenon with roots in the Bible. In his view the conversion of Paul in the New Testament (called Saul before his conversion) serves as an ideal for Christians, with its sudden, dramatic, ecstatic and unpredictable characteristics (“Damascus-conversions”). Throughout his thesis, Stai sticks to a definition of conversion with reference to this Christian ideal, as a strong emotional and dramatic experience. This view has much in common with the ideal of conversion like you could hear it preached in Protestant Christianity, and especially in charismatic Protestant congregations. Such dramatic incidents were not part of the ways my informants conveyed conversion experiences.

In his latest study, the anthropologist Stromberg (1993) also focuses on the inner personal experience, as he defines conversion as a process of self-transformation and commitment. Unlike Stai, Stromberg does not think conversion happens in only one moment in time. His view is that *“the conversion-narrative itself is a central element of the conversion”*. In short, he sees the conversion narrative as a kind of “medicine” the converts use to restore their psychological balance. I do not look at my informants narratives in this perspective. Still I think that Stromberg touches something important when it comes to his view of speech as not only representing an inner experience. I will discuss Stromberg’s approach in more detail later.

Another approach in the conversion-literature entails studies of “converts” who do not necessarily or exclusively communicate such an emotional experience, but rather a new affiliation or identity chosen for various reasons. Ifeka-Moller (1974) defines conversion as a *“change of affiliation from cult to Church, or from orthodox Christianity to spiritualist Church”*. This definition focuses on change of affiliation from one religious community or practice to another— namely a Christian Church. If a definition of conversion for scientific purposes is concerned with change of affiliation, but not emotion or self-transformation, than Ifeka-Moller’s definition of the concept is limited by her focus on only social mobility from cult (what ever lies in such a vague concept) or orthodox Christianity.

I do not see any reason why previous Muslims like Omar, Babokar and Moudou, who decided to join a spiritualist Church, should not be analysed in the same category as those mentioned by Ifeka-Moller. All my informants reported change of affiliation, but some of them also talked about changes in emotions and character. Since these informants partly presented the need for such changes as some of the reasons why they reoriented themselves in terms of religious affiliation, I think it is important to pay attention to these aspects as well - as I have done in the comparison of the interviews.

Kipp (1995) lumps the work of Anthropologists and Historians in one bag¹¹, and argues that most have used the concept conversion to mean: a public, formal change of affiliation - leaving inner experience mute. These scholars do not deny that the conversion can lead to transformation of personal religious experience at the time, or later, though. Kipp says: *“they describe affiliation with a new religion as one part of a process that may have begun with a changed socio-economical environment and may end in the eventual transformation of personal, religious experiences for some or all members of a community”* (op.cit: 871). Kipp identifies herself with this group’s view of opportunities in society as context for conversion . She develops her argument further by discussing Hefner’s (1993b) definition, as she argues that he is both concerned with inner experience and socio-cultural aspects when he define conversion as a commitment to a new identity. Moreover Kipp (1995) claims that it is even evident in Hefner’s own material that “a convert’s new identity may first be lightly worn and only dimly

¹¹ Names mentioned: Colson, Comaroff, Aragon, Firth, Beidelman, Berkhafer, Boutilier, Bromley & Shupe, Sahay, Shinn and Taylor).

understood”. Still there are reasons to talk about a new identity. The significant part of Hefner’s definition is the word “commitment”, which describes, as I understand, that the convert mentally or emotionally deals with the new affiliation in a devoted way.

The “converts” I interviewed within ECG talked about conversions that took place many years prior to the interviews. I have no information on how committed they were at the time they made their choice of changing religious affiliation. Omar and Sarah, however, give account of the first period of time after converting as ambiguous in that they went back to the various religious community they were part of before they “received Jesus”.

From the definitions just presented we can conclude that the researchers are talking about at least three different phenomena: personal and emotional conversion-experiences, conversion as a narrative construction, and conversion as a change in a person’s public signalling of affiliation to religious groups or Churches. I do not see the need to define the concept conversion, only to choose what aspects of the empirical accounts one wants to focus on. I have focused on what the present comprehension of what lead to the conversion are, views on what the conversion effected, and how the stories reflect the informants perception of sanctions in the Church-community and the researchers expectations to them.

My data is concerned about the respondents account of conversion experience. We can not judge whether this experience was conceived in the way it is now described or how much the account has changed through the carrier. To talk about an “original” conversion incident as Stai does, does not seem to make much sense. What I think we could talk about is experience in relation to the conversion-narratives, as experience of meaning and the effort to make coherence in the individuals career, like I have focused on in the presentation of the interviews.

I also take the reports as data of the informant’s ideals, interpretation of events and reflections on how different events are related to one another(the experimental self).

The Socio-cultural approach

Starting with the socio-cultural approach, Kipp (1995) introduces research findings that indicate that conversion narratives play varying roles in different societies and Churches and could be attached to certain styles or dialects. Karo is a religious plural society, but today more than 60%

are Christians - divided into many Churches. When interviewing elder people from a local Protestant Church, and some evangelists in a Pentecostal Church, Kipp is struck by the different conversion stories they tell. The local Protestants tell stories of conversions as a result of one step leading to another, where the opportunity to have education plays important parts in stories from certain periods of the history. The evangelists from the Pentecostal Church on the other hand, tells stories about:

“a string of serious, intractable illnesses, depraved living, depression and angst, or some combination of these problems, followed by an encounter with the Holy Ghost and its “baptism by fire” that had healed and totally reoriented the individual’s life” (Kipp 1995).

Kipp uses historical events to explain why those conversion stories were so different. The Pentecostal Church was started with inspiration from Bethel Temple in Seattle, which is a charismatic oriented movement that emphasises the influence of the Holy Ghost. The Protestant Church (whose members she spent more time with) was started by a Dutch Missionary Society in 1890, where pragmatic conversion narratives had legacy. For the Protestants baptism was the symbol of formal commitment after a period of study for the individual. In the colonial period economical co-operation made it possible for the Mission to involve in education, medical care etc. The long-term goal was that Christianity also should influence secular community. Kipp’s research points out that conversion narratives might reflect the style, theology, tradition etc. of the Church the person is in contact with. The narrative can thus serve different needs for persons in different contexts.

My material shows that this point is partially a suggestive one. What is common in my informants’ stories is that they focus on conversion as process and choice, and that they link these choices to their personal experiences and desires for life meanwhile. The desires related to the conversion are not material though. They do not view their conversion primarily as means to get opportunities, illustrated distinctly by Omar’s emphasis on the fact that he stopped working for missionaries when he converted, to avoid giving the impression that material profit was his motivation for converting. As I have pointed out such accounts of conversion do not have legitimacy within ECG. However, my informants accounts of how they came to be Christians

vary from immediate need for meaning with life, to less acute choices about way of life. From this I appreciate that the accounts are not solely a “product” of the Church-community.

Kipp also argues that conversion in parts of Karo’s history seemed to serve as a strategy to preserve an ethnic identity. In the colonial period, the Church did not grow much in numbers since it was associated too closely with the Dutch colonialists. When the missionaries had to flee from the Japanese in the 1940’ies, they did not leave behind personnel that were trained to lead the organisation. But the Church survived and started increasing again after Indonesian independence made the Karo’s feel a need for defending their interests against a Muslim majority. She concludes that *“in these cases people seem to take up a new religion partly to preserve an ethnic identity”*. In the colonial period on the other side, Kipp points out; the converts had to take suspicion from their neighbours because of the close relationship with the Dutch mission. Therefor faith must have been a main-reason for converting in this period - even if faith is not mentioned in these persons' conversion stories. According to Kipp makes faith is a balancing item, proven by lack of obvious, material gains for the convert.

When I relate Kipp’s study to mine, I do not have reason to believe that becoming a member of ECG serves as such means as to preserve ethnic identity or identity as immigrants - although I do not have statistics or other information on this matter. However, I think this idea of faith in something “pure” that only exist if strategy is not involved, is a mentality that is shared neither by my informants nor by me. For some of them, faith in God is a superior element that embraces other elements, particularly illustrated by Sarah’s comprehension of help from the Church as God’s care. There is no paradox between faith and strategy in this way of thinking; God wants what is best for his children - trusting him would bring about good solutions. Strategy without faith is condemned though, as already mentioned.

The personal and emotional approach

If we turn to the tradition focusing on the personal and emotional context of the narrative, Sverre Stai (1993), who writes on conversion and network in “Trondheim kristne Senter” in Norway, is preoccupied by the conversion as an incident in time. He finds that the informants make contrasts between time before and after the conversion in their stories, and that special forms of expression are repeated in his material. Rather than looking at this as a narrative style or dialect

in the Church-community like Kipp does, he thinks the reason for this structure is to be found in the “original” conversion experience and its implications. His most important point is that the persons network decreases after the conversion. This he explains by stating that the conversion forces the person to ponder over issues and make a choice. The new experience has to be understood within the person’s conversation-universe. He claims that after a conversion-experience, the past is decomposed and the biography must be reconstructed. Different causal schemes are exchanged with only one. The person feels that everything gets clear. The use of analogies makes it difficult to compare the new life with other people’s life. Finally he stresses that the roles the convert plays influences all daily activities and routines.

It might be correct that Stai’s informants exchanged their causal schemes with only one, but there might also be other explanations on the decreased network. For example being a member of “Trondheim kristne Senter” could be a stigmatised identity, and this fact could be a reason why the network decreased once attached to this identity. Even if the biography must be reconstructed, this does not necessarily means that the person is operating with only one causal scheme. It seems like Stai does not pay attention to the converts ability to reflect and to the questions they ask about the choices they have made.

In the interviews I carried out, childhood was presented as one single picture, except for Sarah who spoke of different stages. The conversion was described as a turning point (or a biographic point of reference, as Stai puts it) - that came as a result of a process, in the way that the informants experienced change in their conduct and/or their emotional state. When I asked detailed follow-up questions, the informants differentiated the changes according to the time it took before they came through. Not all changes occurred “over night”. The time after the conversion is contrasted with the childhood-picture. The difficulties of the post-conversion period also seem to be minimised in the story - except for Omar who says that the moment of baptism was the time the problems really started.

The way my questions where formulated and organised, this kind of structure could be expected. It is impossible to judge if the structure would be different had their commission been to tell about their lives in general. It is interesting to notice though that Moudou’s narrative have a similar structure to the interviews, although he spoke on his own initiative and chose his structure himself.

Researchers such as Richardson (1985), Cucchiari (1988) and Dawson (1990)¹² are concerned with what the converts who report self-transformation might have in common. Could there be similarities among the psychological state of these persons? The line of argument asserts that such strong emotional experiences are caused by the persons' stress, deprivation etceteras. This is similar to the way Stromberg (1993) analyse the conversion-narratives of his informants in an Evangelical Church in California. These Christians told about strong emotional experiences and self-transformation connected to their conversion. Stromberg seems to view his informants as people with different kinds of psychological problems, which they resolve through the conversion-narrative. He mention an example: one lady who has problems maintaining clear boundaries around her self, and uses the Christian language to create a sort of balance to God and the surroundings. For some he thinks the emergence of the sudden conversion experience itself was a sign that they suppressed wishes and emotions, and that the telling of the conversion-narrative served the purpose of re-ordering their inner life. Stromberg thinks that the occurrence of such emotional conflicts is due to some kind of problematic cultural logic in the west concerning changes of character:

“The problem of self-transformation entails the problem of will. In a society that regards intention as the ultimate mover in human affairs., the transformation of intention is unfathomable...The conversion narrative is a ritual mechanism that occurs along this fault line in Western common sense” (Stromberg 1993: 18).

It seems like Stromberg thinks that the core of the situation is that a person has conflicting intentions or will on which she bases her choices. If consistency in intentions and will are important factors in the creation of “integrated personalities” in the west, converts would probably not be the only ones struggling with such inner contradictions. Stromberg himself points to dynamic psychotherapy as another ritual-mechanism that serves as means to restore the inner balance of the “patient”, if it succeeds. I think there is an important difference between these two examples of ways to deal with inner contradictions. In psychotherapy the “patient” has not found means to handle such conflicts and searches for help to do so. The converts have found ways to handle their situation themselves, according to Stromberg, and should thus not be

¹² According to Kipp (1995).

viewed as suffering from mental illness¹³. It is likely that such contradictions are rather common, and that there are many different ways to deal with it. If so, the argument that conversion-narratives work as such a ritual does not explain why some choose to resolve their inner contradictions in this way but not in another. Knowing that “mental illness” is stigmatised in the west (p.124), Strombergs analyses also have ethical implications as Gullestad have pointed out in a lecture given at this year’s annual conference in the Norwegian Anthropological Association.

Stromberg argues against viewing the self as a “true self” or “inner essence”, and suggests that it should be seen as an ability to be reflectively aware. He does not see conversion narratives as products of such reflexivity, but rather as an identity - defined as a congeries of ways of doing things - where coherence and continuity are maintained “in action over time”. He focuses not only on what the informants intentionally express, but also on less controllable expressions such as the pause length, stutters, voice tone etceteras (Stromberg 1993:27-35). In doing so, he wants to reveal what is hidden for the informants. This method has much in common with psychoanalysis, Stromberg himself admits. Is this not an attempt to reach some kind of essence, or at least truth? Why is such an attempt necessary when the informants have found means to cope with life?

I have not analysed how the stories were told by my informants, only what was told and the context in which they were told. I would like to view what the informants told me as their reflections on the matters as they occurred at the time and in the situation they spoke. In this sense I do not see the self as an activity of reflecting out of context. Still, I would like to hold on to the self-awareness as an important element of the interviews.

As mentioned earlier my informants did not refer to their conversion as a “Damascus”-experience, as Strombergs informants did. They referred to it as a process that led to a choice. Still some of them report changes in their conduct and psychological state. They relate these

¹³ The psychologist Leon Festinger presented in 1957 a theory concerning changes in beliefs and attitudes (Cognitive dissonance theory): People want consistency in their beliefs and attitudes, and whenever beliefs and attitudes conflict with each other tension motivates changes in behavior or cognition (Roediger, H.L; Rushton, J.P; Capaldi, E.D.; Paris, S.G. 1987: *Psychology*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston).

changes to the conversion. A choice is thereby seen as something bringing about changes of character. Maybe change of intention or will is not that difficult to deal with for them as for Strombergs informants? When looking at the interviews of Sarah and Melanie, I have the feeling that they understand their changes partly as a result of their new way of thinking. I am not saying that they did not really believe that God intervened in their life. However, they knew that if they did not trust God it would not help them very much. These two then chose, and maybe learned a different way to think about themselves and their life and also a new way of reacting towards new experiences. As I will show in the chapters concerning the two meetings in ECG which I participated in during the fieldwork, especially the Ladies' meetings were used as opportunities to share, practice on and inspire each other to continue this way of thinking.

5.2 VIEWS ON EXPERIENCE AND SPEECH

Kirsten Danielsen (1993) has used narratives as sources of knowledge on careers, or socio-cultural conditions contemporary with the time referred to in the narratives. In this work she became preoccupied by “white spots” in narratives. She defines this concept as the types of experience and knowledge the researcher does not obtain knowledge about (op.cit:12). It is possible to understand this as possible sources of error or information that is missing in narratives. Even though I find it hard to affiliate with an understanding which presuppose that there exists something like one full, authentic story of a person's life, I find Danielsens discussion useful in an examination of the relation between narratives and experience. I have looked for the ways the conversion accounts of my informants reflected sanctions in the Church community, but I do not see this as a way to correct the stories for “errors”. Let us take a closer look at Danielsen's argument in order to identify where our views depart.

Danielsen analyses the presentation of life histories as a communication-process with a sender (the narrator), a message (the story), and a receiver (the re-narrator). The narrator could wish to present an idealised image of herself. This would be official versions of how it should have been, but not necessarily were, and could be told because of lack of trust in the receiver or because the teller wants to show politeness, Danielsen writes. As time moves on, this representation of self could easily cease to function, either because the need to present a polished image of oneself is no longer there, or the person doesn't have the patience to keep the false image. The polished stories can be important inlets to people's ideals. One can reveal that one is dealing with ideals

when finding contrasting statements. By giving more time, one can find more credible versions of the story, Danielsen concludes.

Arguing this way, Danielsen suppose that some versions of a story are more real than others. In doing so, she also presume that an event can be clearly separated from it's verbalisation. According to Bauman (1986) an increasing number of researchers have taken another standpoint in relation to what an event consists of, which I believe is suggestive. I quote:

“..events are not the external raw materials out of which narratives are constructed, but rather the reverse: Events are abstractions from narrative. It is the structures of signification in narrative that give coherence to events in our understanding, that enable us to construct in the interdependent process of narration and interpretation a coherent set of interrelationships that we call an “event”.” (Bauman 1986: 5)

The second condition Danielsen mentions is called unredeemed experience. The informant could have experiences that are so difficult to face, that she either neglects them or presents several different and contrasting versions of his or her life. This also creates white spots in the story, she thinks. Rather than viewing paradoxes as something that creates “white spots”, I think it should be seen as valuable information. In contrast Gullestad (1996:7) criticises the view that peoples reflections are interruptions, something that hides what is really interesting. She argues that peoples reflections on written life stories are the very features that makes such material valuable, and I would argue that interview-material could also be seen as self-reflection. In addition to the reflective process of making coherence in the memory of one's career, Bauman thinks that narratives also work as tools to explore and question what went on, ergo earlier explanations of the incident.

Further, Danielsen refers to Bruners (Danielsen 1993), who divide between life as lived, life as experienced and life as presented. The life-story implies constructions, guided by conventions and rules. When one writes and analyses the story, one could easily give the impression that one is dealing with life as lived, she warns.

Danielsen does not focus on life as experienced or how experience is related to life as lived and life as presented. Her aim is to understand how life was lived through an analysis of narratives.

My aim is to understand how my informants establish narratives of their lives which they experience as meaningful and true to “life as lived”.

Rudie (1995) explores exactly the relation between life as experienced and life as presented. She criticises Connortons view of memory and speech as incorporated practice. Rudie thinks that the body is predisposed for analogue flow of information. By this she means for instance that different ways to act are filed as images, which can be re-collected. Memory and speech on the other hand, she thinks implies certain digital handling of information. The images are “*restricted and contrasted to each other through mental marks or punctuations¹⁴*” (Rudie 1995:55 my translation). Oral narratives and rituals presented in a local context represents distinctions and choices. They are results of astonishment, reflection and personal memory, but can still be angled and adjusted.

Therefore, Rudie underlines, the narrative is never definitive, but is undergoing continual change with reference to the context in which the narrative is told, and to the situation in which the person finds himself in a particular moment. Her argument is also relevant when it comes to using the narrative as source of information on the persons emotional experiences, since new experiences would lead to a renewed view on previous events in continual process.

I have seen my informants replies to my questions as a temporary result of their contextualised self-reflection. I think Rudie’s view that every astonishment implies restriction and contrast supports my argument. Although Rudie argues that narratives change according to the present situation and new experiences, she seems to think of speech mainly as something representing experience. Stromberg (1993) is the only one of the conversion-researchers introduced who discusses the relationship between language and experience and he thinks differently about language than Rudie:

“I have now come to doubt my earlier assumption that any language can be assumed to simply re-present experience. I have come to suspect the conviction that behind a subject’s

¹⁴ The word used in Norwegian; “punktering”, means both puncture and punctuation, but the latter seems to be of primary explanatory importance in this context.

language lies a set of events and emotions that the language transparently reflects...The “pointing to a separately existing reality” assumption is wrong in part because language always shapes the reality it describes” (Stromberg 1993).

Although I have criticised Stromberg’s assumption of informants as mentally ill persons and his method of reaching the hidden “truth” of his informants, I think his point about language as giving shape to experience is suggestive. I do not see any reason why the view of speech as reflection and a view of speech as influencing experience could not be combined. Sarah, Melanie and Babokar’s reflection on how God has protected and cared for them both creates an expectation that He will do so also in the future and a feeling of security in the present.

I think Gullestad makes exactly this combination when she writes:

“Human beings use conventional narrative means to give shape to their experiences, and the experiences are to a certain extent constituted by the way they are told. Narratives are not only distilled from life, they also flow back into life.” (Gullestad 1996:8)

Returning to Danielsen, she points out that the narrator often brings out incidents that disrupt an established order. This comes forth as turning points. She refers to Denzin (Danielsen 1993), who claims that the idea that life is shaped by its turning points, is profoundly rooted in western mentality. Everyday life is thus not very articulated. The narrators aim of telling the particular story can also result in some issues being focused more than others. People usually try to create coherence in their lives, which might not be so obvious to start with, she writes.

However, the choices made and the coherence created when telling ones own story could be similar to the mental process by which life is experienced (Carr 1986). If so, it would be strange to see it as white spots in the story.

Lastly, Danielsen mentions the re-narrator as the cause to possible white spots. She mentions involvement in the subject of research, both as something positive and as a risk. The researcher controls the story and the record of it. A researcher-biography can draw the attention to the direction of this control. Although I do not appreciate the concept of white spots; the idea that something obviously is “missing” in a story, I agree that the researcher controls the stories and that the presentation of it would be affected by this fact. I have tried to reflect both on my own

experiences with the topic of the study and my relationship to the informants. There is no such thing as a complete picture. All presentations of a topic is partial and positioned. As a result one should put emphasis on contextualising and positioning the knowledge presented rather than looking for “errors” or for what is missing.

6. CLOSING DISCUSSION

Morris (1984) offers an overview of some research on concepts of person in different communities in Africa. He concludes that the researchers have pointed out similar traits on this matter: concepts of person as something attached to the human body, to other sentient beings, with significant social groups (including ancestral spirits), and with the natural world. Thus he thinks a possible conclusion would be that African concepts of the person is less individualistic and more connected with other beings than western concepts of person are regarded as. As I have pointed out (chapter five), several of the researchers who have studied conversion-narratives also point out conformity with reference to the kinds of conversion narratives that members of a certain Church tell (Kipp, Stai, Stromberg) and with reference to what function such narratives serves for individuals (Stromberg).

In the project proposal I formulated questions concerning the functions and significance of Christianity for ECG-members in their efforts towards tackling life in different social contexts. I both assumed that I would find striking similarities like conversion researchers have reported,

and that the ECG-members had concepts of person that were not individualistic as both Morris and various researchers on African “traditional” religion have pointed out.. I expected to find that the Gambian Church-members close relation to “traditional religion”, confronted with the WEC missionaries cultural influence, created an area of role-dilemmas for the Church-members, and that the members partly had opportunistic motives for conversion (sequence 2.1). Due to processes during my fieldwork, my approach was narrowed but broadened. My approach was narrowed in the sense that I only “observed” my informants in two types of social contexts: Church-gatherings and Interviews/conversations with me as a researcher. It was broadened in the sense that I put aside my presumptions or hypotheses, and for that matter I developed a more open attitude towards the study. My informants did not conceive their conversion or affiliation with the Church as opportunistic. Neither did they affiliate with “traditional religion” or seem to have non-individualistic concepts of themselves. The language in the conversion-accounts were not characterised by the use of metaphors reported as common in Evangelical communities (canonical language) and which to some degree was present in the Church Service. Rather the informants accounted for their conversion as an individual choice, in a plain language.

The open questions I finally put forward as my focus (page 1) concerned in short what the members’ conversion accounts conveyed, and in what ways they were related to the ideas, morals and sanctions that characterised the Church community.

I have described and analysed two Church gatherings: Sunday Services and Omega ladies’ meetings (chapter 3). I pointed out that the Sunday Services were characterised by rule-governance and strong direction from the platform. The message commonly communicated by the preacher (who occupies a grate deal of time in the Services) concerned God’s plan with the individual. The preacher often urged the members to renew and strengthen their dedication to God and his congregation on earth. The Service also included elements where the members could participate actively in communicating such a dedication (praise-songs, communion, offering etceteras). The Omega ladies’ meetings on the other hand were characterised by less role-governed form, and more informal and personal interaction than the Services. Almost every lady participated actively in the meetings by sharing their everyday life worries and delights, like when Bible-studies, prayers, and visiting another member were on the agenda.

Further, I have presented five ECG-members’ conversion accounts, compared them and

discussed their individuality when related to sanctions in the Church community and the characteristics of the Church gatherings (chapter 4). My main discovery when comparing the conversion-accounts were that they were very different, when regarding the experiences they mentioned as important in relation to their reorientation towards Protestantism. Variation was also seen when it came to what needs the informants recalled that they had, and to what degree they told about self-transformation as a result of converting. I consider the fact that the expressions of the motivation to convert were so different, to mean that Christianity was meaningful for my informants in different ways at the time of the interviews - that they used the symbols of their faith in different ways for different purposes. Thus I regard my informants' different conversion-accounts as signs that they had "**individual projects**" going on with regard to Protestant Christianity. However, none of the informants expressed that they converted as a result of opportunistic incentives. When it came to the understanding of conversion as a process that led to an individual choice to convert, my informants' accounts were identical as well. Accounts of strong emotional incidents as result of God's intervention, like some researchers report (Stai, Stromberg), were completely absent in my data material. In this way I can say that the accounts were products of, or reflected characteristics of the interaction in the Church community.

My main discovery in this thesis is that Christianity becomes meaningful for my informants in individual ways. This individuality did not appear for me by looking at Church-gatherings alone. I was not able to **observe** this diversity of individuals relation to Christianity in the members interaction with each other. Since the informants reflected on their relationship to Christianity and/or Church during the interviews in ways I did not observe that they did in Church-gatherings, I have chosen to regard my informants accounts expressions of **self-reflection** or the "experimental self" as Gullestad (1996) puts it, that is an ongoing effort to grasp, make coherence in memories, and question earlier understandings. What is important for me to argue is that such efforts should not be seen as just representations of inner emotions and thoughts, but rather in complex ways linked to and part of **experience**.

I have pointed out that even those members who were in opposition to the policies and moral standards communicated in interaction in the Church-community (Jacob, Richard and to some degree Moudou), did not express this attitudes in Church-gatherings as I was able to notice.

These members participated in similar ways as the others, Moudou and Jacob even being praise-leaders now and then (until Jacob was put under discipline), performing this duty in a similar self-conscious manner as other praise-leaders. In this way there arises a discrepancy between their self-image/reflection as Christians and the way they are categorised by other Church-members. When a crisis occurs, where someone is “caught” conducting what the Church regards as a sin (Jacob), or opposition to the Church are communicated openly (Richard), there is still a discrepancy. Before such a crisis the member in question saw himself as a Christian who had conflicting views or moral conduct with the Church, while the other Church members regarded him as a “serious Christian brother”. After such a crisis, the individual regarded himself just as good a Christian as before, while the other members communicated in subtle ways that he was “just a fake” Christian. In conversations with me these members reflected on this discrepancy, and as such showed signs of role-distance as Gullestad (1996) understands the concept (see section 2.3).

The President of ECG also reflects upon the discrepancy of his identity as a Christian and his role as the leader of the Church. In conversations with me he communicated liberal attitudes to the Bible, and the moral conduct that could be interpreted as sinful according to it, while he communicated almost fundamental views on the Biblical quest for certain moral conduct while performing as a preacher in Sunday Service. His explanation of this difference is of a functionalistic nature: He appreciate some moral conduct as better for the Gambian society as a whole, that is making the Gambian society function in a better way. He does not believe that communicating his liberal views of the Bible while preaching would have the desired motivating effect on the members to live according to the morals he believes is best for the Gambian society. Therefor he present these morals as God’s indisputable and sacred words when he is preaching. Regarding the members appreciation of the “Biblical approach” in ECG that they say were crucial for their decision to join ECG, the Presidents performance as a preacher might be effective.

With regard to the two women I interviewed, there seemed to be less discrepancy between their self-image/reflection and other members categorisation of them. In addition they also had the possibility to “practice” on certain ways to react to and interpret events in their lives (what I call self-reflection) in the ladies-meetings, but not in the Church Services. They drew out events

from their everyday life, and made links and interpretations of them with respect to Gods care and control over their life. This I think is a highly positive practice from the ladies point of view. It is important to note that when analysing the conversion-accounts of Melanie and Sarah I argued that the two ladies seemed to reflect on these ways of thinking - they were aware of the importance of it for their well-being (Sarah: “If I don’t trust, I will fall”, and Melanie: “I do not wish to call everything that happens coincidence”).

As a result I have grounds to say that my second discovery in my data-material concerns gender difference: it was only men who communicated opposition to the Church and reflected on discrepancy between their self-image/reflection and the categorisation from other Church-members. Several of this projects traits should prevent generalisations of this discovery as long as further research has not yet been carried out: My data concerns only a few members, and it is likely that my presentation of myself as a non-Christian attracted those who experienced such discrepancy. I did not study the Omega men’s meetings and as such we do not know if the differences I have pointed out between the Service and the ladies’ meetings might also be the fact between the Service and other meetings on workdays with few participants. My second discovery thus offers an interesting hypothesis for further studies.

The members of ECG whom I interviewed viewed themselves as “active” converts, and reflected upon their own motives for converting. Several of them also reflected on their attachment to the membership-role. According to my informants, the conversion and the membership in the Church are just two of many choices in which they have disassociated themselves with their parents and the community in which they were raised: They have educated themselves - two up to University level. Three of them have migrated to Gambia. They live either with no lover or in monogamous relationships. They do not circumcise their daughters. They do not seek “traditional” means of protection. They have in several ways sought to change their carriers, affiliated themselves into new communities and thereby achieved different evaluations and influence from their surroundings. All these indicate, as far as I am able to judge, that they regard themselves as subjects who have managed choices in life that they do not present as common in the environment they were raised. Thus I conceive my informants as highly self-aware active agents, individuals that make individually motivated choices.

In an anthropological study of students in Singapore and their relationship to the government,

Østberg (1999) indicates that Protestant Christians are more individualistic oriented than students who are affiliated with other religious-communities, in the sense that they are more concerned with what they conceive as their own inner emotions. The difference between Morris' conclusions and my discoveries opens up for such questions like if, and in that case how, education, Protestant Christianity, or maybe experiences as migrants influence peoples concepts of person. I think it would be a shortcut simplification to conclude that the conversion to Protestant Christianity was necessary as means to cope with a changed lifestyle. We know for a fact that many people in West-Africa make the same kind of choices in their careers as my informants did, but do not convert to Protestant Christianity. I would assume that any relations between Protestant Christianity and carriers are much more complex than such a hypothesis indicates.

Throughout this project, I have been preoccupied with a wish to analyse and present my data-material in a way that would not result in the "alienation" of my informants from being living persons in the text. I do see that a text could be too open, in the sense that it could confuse or even mislead the reader. Still I wanted to make a quite open text - open for interpretation for the reader and accessible for my informants, and I have made choices in this respect: I have written in English and by doing so I have also forced my self to take into considerations my informants possible reaction on my presentation of them. I changed my initial research problem partly because I felt uneasy about the deviation between it and the ideas my informants expressed. I have quoted my informants quite a lot throughout the text, and I have not used very categorical definitions on concepts (like ritual, self, narratives, experience). I would like to emphasise that these choices felt right for me in this particular project. I do not set them out as general arguments for how Anthropological projects should be handled. On the other hand I do hold contextualising the knowledge presented as an ideal for Anthropology. By situating the researcher in relation to the project as part of such a context, both the researcher and the reader would be reminded of the subjective nature of knowledge-production.

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APPENDIX

This is the interview-guide I made before I went to the Gambia to do my fieldwork. As I have explained, this guide worked first of all as an “idea-bank” - I did not stick to it completely.

Nationality
Ethnic group
Languages
Education
sex
Age
Civil status

Before converting/taking decision:

- What religion do your parents belong to? Are they practising their religious beliefs actively?
- Would you tell me what beliefs and attitudes towards life that dominated your life before you became a Christian?
- How did these influence your emotions and your actions in life? Give examples.

First period of Christian life:

- Can you remember any particular event or persons that played important parts in your decision to become a Christian?
- How would you describe the first period of time after you made the decision to become a Christian? Were there any major changes in your life-style and psychological state? What do you think was the reason for these changes?

Relationship with the Church:

- Is there any issue were you dislike or disagree the theology or practices of the Church?
- Who do you think plays the major parts in decision-making and forming the theology of the Church?
- How did you get in touch with the Church? Why do you choose to be a part of it?
- Do you think it is major differences between this Church and other Churches?
- How do you feel about the missionaries that are related to the Church? Are there any sources

for conflict between the Church and the mission?

- Have you ever been sanctioned by the Church or guided to change in any major way?

Personal relationship with God:

- Do you feel that there are connections between your previous beliefs and your beliefs now?

- Is there any belief or practices that you think would be okay to continue as a Christian, which are rejected by the Church? If so, how do you handle that?

- What is your image of God? How do you relate to him?

- Are you ever scared that you might be rejected by God?

- Are you ever scared that evil spirits might influence your life?

- Do you ever have doubts about Gods existence?

- Do you think the Bible gives you answer to all questions you have in a undebatable way, or do you think the Bible could be interpreted in different ways -all correct?