

When the listener becomes a speaker

— Entering the space of ethnography among Born-again Christians in Durban, South Africa

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In this paper, I want to explore what Harding (1995) calls the space of ethnography; the distant/close nexus that more or less defines the anthropological fieldwork enterprise, considered by many as crucial for us to do the work. More specific I will, within the context of Born-again Christians in Wentworth, South Africa, discuss some dilemmas of doing fieldwork among orthodox evangelists, in particular, and, religious fundamentals in general. The main dilemma is perhaps this: Many of us, in some way or another, manage to get incorporated, accepted or initiated in the group we study. Although conscious about the impossibility of going native completely (nor an aim epistemologically) what happens in cases such as mine, when the primary mission, the foundation of existence of the informants, is exactly just that; to have you saved and 'going born-again completely'? The paradoxical ethnographic space of overlap between nearness and distance, or in the Born-again terminology; between belief and disbelief, conversion and non-conversion, heaven or hell is not possible to enact. Either you are saved or you are not saved.

Doing fieldwork among Pentecostal-Charismatic (members of the movement of "Jesus Celebration Center", JCC from now on) in the former "colored" area of Wentworth, Durban, South Africa, there was no middleground for me, no neutral "participant observer" position, no place for an anthropologist who 'seek information' about born-again culture. It was inconceivable to the born-again that anyone with an 'appetite' for the gospel (asking questions, attending prayer meetings, helping them with transport to the church) such as mine was simply motivated by a request to 'gather information' for my thesis. On the contrary, I 'was searching', a search that was indeed not accidental. I wasn't sent to the movement by chance, I was a lost soul on the brink of salvation.

The point is: in following Carol Delaney's advice to "sit and listen"

(1988), I was included and located in the born-again narrative¹ of conversion and evangelism as an active participants that I, to my surprise, didn't manage to resist despite desperate attempts to interpret and reflect over what was being said. I sometimes felt trapped, caught up in the intense rhetoric of conversion, the language of Christ, encouraged to undergo a rite of passage, a rite of conversion that would have me to invest in a radical different mode of organizing and interpreting experience.

What is it about this rhetoric that makes it so powerful in converting unbelievers? And, what is the significance of *practicing* this rhetoric, this narrative for converted believers? What is conversion really about?

In what follows I will first give a suggestion on the latter, on *what* the nature of conversion can be said to be, by going back in time and critically discuss some selected, perhaps a bit arbitrarily, former discussions on the phenomenon, leading up to my point of departure.² Thereafter, I will say something about *how* the performance of the language and rhetoric of orthodox Christianity belief triggers the process of conversion. What makes it such a powerful performance? The interpretation of this will also include me, as indicated above. Through a tentative analysis of a part of a dialogue I had with the JCC movement's pastor, I will try to show how I was located and incorporated in the narrative of the conversion, caught up in an ambivalent display of belief, where there was no mediating position for me as an anthropologist. Finally I will discuss the significance of practicing the language for the Born-again believer, by considering a prayer request given to me in prayer meeting with JCC.

Conversion — from evolution to identity

Understanding conversion to religion has challenged studies of religion and social theory for well over a century. Theoretical accounts were for a long time entangled in questions about the nature of cultural evolution and the rationality of different religions. Traditional religions were seen as primitive, magical delusional and taboo fetishist. Only where intellectual coherence and moral rigor existed, a crucial aspect of world religions, could the need for traditional placebos diminish and the foundation for a more ethical order could be laid, providing a higher truth of the world faiths. Converting to world religions was in other words considered a march towards human enlightenment and development. (Frazer 1922; Tylor 1913) Cultural evolution was also religious evolution towards a greater ability to reason and a deeper ethical awareness.

Although the evolutionary model was replaced with an interest for the specific, the particular, not fitting in stages of evolution, not all disciplines were equally reluctant to draw on a comparative model of cultural develop-

ment. Both within and beyond the boundaries of anthropology, a renewed interest in the model was taken through social theory in United States, formulated in terms like “comparative history” and “social change”. Partly related to this interest was the post-war concern with political-economical development, given theoretical articulation in modernization theory (Hoben and Hefner 1991) For these scholars also, religious change illustrated principles of social development. Conversion was development.

Conversion as rationalization

Many important social theoretical figures in the postwar period, like Talcott Parsons, Edward Shils and Clifford Geertz looked towards the German sociologist Max Weber in trying to understand the reality of religion and the forces behind religious change and conversion. Influenced by late nineteenth centuries ideal on magic, science and religion, Weber argued that a key principle distinguished traditional religions from world religions; the latter’s superior rationalizations, (Weber 1956) being able to formulate comprehensive response to ethical, emotional and intellectual challenges of life. Traditional religions, for Weber, was ideal typical embodied in the magician seeking to achieve an essentially mechanistic control over the supernatural. Spirits, Weber argues, are for the magical more an object to be manipulated than a deity to be worshipped, (Weber 1956:28) requiring little systematic reflection and leads only to ad hoc answers to problems of meaning. In other words: conversion is rationalization.³

Although many historical and ethnographical studies in one sense support the idea that most of the successful and effective faiths, identified as world religions, seem to be more consistently rationalized than traditional ones. We must, as Hefner argues (1993:15) look at rationalization to mean a “formal systematization and codification of rite, doctrine and authority,” and distinguish this with how cultural forms affect the life world or understanding of believers, not working with the notion that religious belief is automatically internalized by the believers and “[...] get inclusive formulations and evoke comprehensive attitudes.” (Geertz 1973:172)

In other words; how does people start to identify themselves and practice as religious? In what way does conversion, as a cultural form have impact upon their understanding of self and identity? What does it do to them? Or in the terms of Hefner:

[...] We must distinguish cultural rationalization – the enunciation, systematization, and formalization of cultural truths in light of a particular value or ideal, a quality of sociocultural *systems* (his italic) – from the broader concept of rationality and the effective-

ness of certain ideas at making sense of and individual or group's life-world, again with reference to some underlying value complex. (Hefner 1993:15)

Weber seemed to assume an unproblematic equivalence or an automatically internalization between cultural rationalization and the experimental rationality at the level of the individual, an equivalence broadly criticized by anthropology (Malinowski 1948, Evans-Pritchard 1937, Levi-Strauss 1966) demonstrating the variety of flexibility and systematicity in traditional mode of thought. The phenomenology of conversion is similarly varied and must be interpreted with a concern for the experimental variation as well as the social, political, and cultural factors surrounding conversion. Also I suggest that, following Hefner, an analytical minimum in understanding conversion is that it implies the acceptance of a new locus of self-understanding, a new reference point for identity, moral authority and reconceptualized social identity. Conversion does not involve evolution of faith, or rationalization of thought, but formation of identity, an acquiring of a set of rules for life that provides for a new sense of self-worth and community.

Conversion — deprivation or identity?

More recent paradigms of explaining conversion, or religious movements as such, was to view them as reactions to deprivation, sharing a notion of vulnerability, psychological or social stress and interpersonal influence (converted kin, friends, mentors) in their models of explanations (Gerlach and Hine 1970). These correlations were later on pointed out as unproblematic as there is not enough regularity, considering the fact that many Charismatics or neo-Pentecostals are relatively affluent with relatively stable lifestyles. Another dominant canon of literature on the subject explores the ritual practices and the psychological techniques that trigger the experience of transformation, from one worldview to another (Frank 1973)

Although these perspectives are fruitful, they tend to overlook (perhaps with an underlying idea that nobody in their 'right minds' would believe this stuff) that many religious movements can be quite powerful forums for constructing new selves and identities. In this paper I view these identity formations from the viewpoint of the persuasive language of conversion. Instead of looking for factors behind why some people listen to the gospel, within orthodox Protestantism, the importance made on the Holy Spirit, the words of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ, written, spoken, heard or read in converting the unbeliever, making him or her to accept a new locus for self-understanding, is worthwhile considering. It is throughout the words of God that the supernatural order becomes known, experienced, and real. It

is God himself that circumscribes the heart through his words.

In the following I will, from the aspect of language and rhetoric in orthodox Christianity, try to say something about and how people convert, starting to accept a new locus for self-understanding, a new moral authority and social identity. To be short, I suggest that conversion, from the aspect of language, involve a process of acquiring a specific religious language, locating themselves in the gospel narrative with the plot of rebirth, regeneration and salvation, reconceptualising their social identity.

The 'culture'

The 'culture' of born-again Christianity is premised on a commitment to assimilate the world in fundamental terms. Through encountering, reconfiguring, and incorporating their specimens on earth in the gospel narrative of Jesus Christ, they reproduce a mode of interpretations that, perhaps most persuasively, is inherent in the rhetoric of conversion. At the core of fundamental Christian language lies the web of symbolic, poetic, narrative and rhetorical devices that confront individuals or groups, engaged in a mission to strip their basic human and cultural assumption and invest them with a radical different mode of interpreting and organizing experience.

The rhetoric of conversion, as a bundle of strategies, has some sources of efficacy that I think needs to be explored. How does the language and performance of fundamental Pentecostal-Charismatic witnessing convict and convert unsaved believers? To start and answer, witnessing is, how I see it, both rhetorical; as an argument on the transformation of self that unbelievers must go through, and a method; for starting to bring that change about in those who listen to it. Witnessing, then, is not only about constituting the speaker as a cultural person, also, it is a dialogue that reconstitutes its listeners, locating them within a new worldview. Hence I ask; what are the consequences of listening to those words?

The Words

Much of the collective ritual activity amongst orthodox Protestants is centered round the word, the Word of God. Church services prayer meetings or other collective events are stripped of overt, imagistic and sacramental material. Sensuous, non-linguistic means of spiritual experiences are nonexistent; it is the speaking of the word, the gospel that is at the heart of all religious practice.

The speaking of the gospel in JCC is done in several situations. Two important ones is preaching and witnessing. The preaching is a formal oration addressed to a body of believers by an ordained or anointed speaker in a

church service or revival crusade. The services occur within a clearly ritual format, a collective scenario where the mode interpreting is enacted. Witnessing occurs more informally and can find place almost anywhere. The purpose is for the speaking believer to convert the listening unbeliever. Sometimes, the two parts do not share the same understanding of the situation, sometimes they do. The point however is that it is not a conversation as such that takes place, but an attempt to construct a religious reality somehow at odds with the listeners experiences. This reality is attempted impressed upon the unbeliever, in order for him or her to be able to feel hear and know this reality to be true.⁴

In the following I will try to show how I, implicitly in a conversation with the JCC movement's main pastor, was located and attempted refashioned by the rhetoric of conversion, refashioned towards the paradoxical space of overlap between belief and disbelief, or in ethnographic terms: between nearness and distance, lostness and salvation.

The dialogue

Early in the field, I saw it as useful to engage in dialogues with the leader of the JCC movement, in order for me to get elaborated aspects of the cultural ontology, the objectives and the interpretations, considered important for him to convey and sustain in the JCC movement. After a discussion on baptism in the Holy Ghost,⁵ the pastor started to speak about the born-again phenomenon and how the transformation of self comes about, as well as divine healing (see the pastor's formulation in the forthcoming).

A: Pastor, yesterday (from our dialog the day before) you started to talk about baptism in the Holy Ghost. Can you tell me more upon that? What does it take to become baptized?

P: Yes, the qualifications for baptism in the Holy Ghost are very important to understand, the qualifications, the gift of righteousness. When you are born again you become a Child of God, you receive Jesus into you heart, straight away, according to John (1:11–12) you become a son of God, the sign that you are the son of God is the spirit so the baptism of the Holy Spirit is given to the Child of God, as a gift through Jesus, not through your own self, what you have done, it is just a gift of God. So when you receive Christ as your personal saviour, it is a gift instantaneously, you don't become a son of God progressively, you become a son of God instantly and then you receive baptism of the Holy Ghost, it says you need to wait upon the baptism and you ask the Father to baptise you. It is one of the most powerful, I wouldn't say one of the most, it is the most powerful. So what one needs to understand is justification. Justification de-

declares a person righteous, you know like some people say they are unworthy to receive baptism in the Holy Ghost. You don't receive the baptism of the Holy Ghost by living right. You must receive the gift of righteousness. Justification is when Jesus says you are a saint, he declares you righteous. Then you have the right to receive the baptism. Some people battle with that and say: «No, I am not worthy, but who says you can ever be worthy without Gods grace? That saved us, that delivered us, that set us free. To receive the Baptism of the Holy Ghost is just to ask the father and then of course he declares us righteous but we do know what the Bible says about the progressive work of sanctification. Sanctification is the process whereby through yielding to the Holy Spirit, you become conformed to the character of Jesus Christ in the image of Christ.

A: What about instant healing?

P: Healing is as a result of re-birth. The Spirit of God, enters your life and quickens your spirit and your spirit that was there, because of the sin of Adam, comes back to life. Like a person who has lost his heartbeat, and dies as a result. He is brought back so to speak through an electric shock, he is brought back and he becomes conscious again. When your are restored to the position where Adam was, before he sinned, whatever Adam was before you are, and we have one problem; the mind. The mind has been conditioned and programmed by sin. So sin dictated to the mind says: “You are sick”. You know, and, as a result of sin, sickness came into the world. Now when your spirit is re-born, regenerated through the washing of the word of God, the mind has to be renewed and that is a process where you start to unlearn what was learned through life as a result of being a sinner the mind was programmed according to that life. [...] You have to learn through discipline and commitment, a discipline where you don't go about according to how you feel, because your emotions have been pre-programmed by that, you know you're sin life. A sinful life and sinful habits. Now you have to renew your mind, as John says in John chapter 1:26–27 that says we need to renew the mind, you know we need to be a do of the word of God. And the word of God, when you start to program your mind to the Word of God, you begin to realise: “Hey yes man, the Bible says I've been healed as a result of the stripes of Jesus. [...]” then everything else falls into place. Sickness won't be a problem because you know that healing is part of the package, is part, what Jesus made available for us, through his death. But it's hard for the mind to accept that, it is very difficult.

A: But this is a process?

P: Yes, it's a process. You see the greatest fight is against the past life, and

the past programming of the mind. If Christians can reprogram your mind in the word of God, they will become notorious and overcomers in their daily life. [...] You need to get rid of all pre-conceived ideas.

A number of performative features seem to lie on the surface of the pastor's "speech". According to Bauman, (1977:15–24) writing within the sociolinguistic approach to performance in anthropology, "performances sets up, or represents, an interpretive frame within which messages being communicated are to be understood, and that this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the literal" (1975: 292), the frame defining a certain genre. And important for my own situation, according to Bauman, the act of performance has the potential of constructing new forms of social relations:

It is part of the essence of performance that it offers to the participants a special enhancement of experience, bringing with it a heightened intensity of communicative interaction which binds the audience to the performer in a way that is specific to performance as a mode of communication. Through his performance, the performer elicits the participative attention and energy of his audience, and to the extent that they value his performance, they will allow themselves to be caught up in it. When this happens, the performer gains measure of prestige and control over the audience – prestige because of the demonstrated competence he had displayed, control because the flow of interaction is in his hands. When the performer gains control in this way, the potential for transformation in the social structure may become available to him as well (Bauman 1975:305).

Bauman takes social structure to indicate the structure of relation between the speaker and the listener. In my case, in the dialogue, I suggest that a certain type of relation was established between the pastor and myself. His ritual language had the intention, on my behalf, to constitute a certain way of acting. The performative utterance, as Austin (1975) and Searly (1969 and 1979) would put it, was one where the sentence(s) not only served to declare conceptually or metaphorically some state of affairs, but to bring about changes in my thoughts and behavior⁶. As for semiotics, the pastor, as I see it, throughout the dialog, communicated my relationship to his speech quite directly through his use of pronouns: "[...] when *you* are born again *you* become a Child of God, *you* receive Jesus into you heart", and: "To receive baptism of the Holy Ghost is just to ask the father and then of course he declares *us* righteous [...]".

The pastor continues throughout his speech, as I see it, to place me in the rest of his narrative, to signify me in the pronouns' referents. I make this assumption based on following indications on how I was 'read' in the field.

The assumption gains support, I think from several events: the JCC pastor had a prophesy over my life, being directed by the Holy Spirit to convey the message about me becoming as an Apostle, going to start a revival in Norway, having thousands of Norwegians converted. My presence as a student, studying the JCC Movement, was therefore considered “a process of accountability.” By ‘witnessing’ “the presence of the Holy Spirit”, seeing the results of “Gods work” in the lives of the JCC members, gradually acquiring myself the language of Christ and the practices of the Born-again, I was considered to be accountable in conveying the gospel of Jesus Christ, bringing Norwegians under conviction. Moreover I was, after four months of field-work, asked to pray in front of the believers in a prayer meeting, holding hands in the spirit. Obviously for the members then, was to request that I should become Born-again. It was the logical next step to take. Through this however, I felt, (also in other dialogs, both with the pastor and other members of JCC), that I was subject to a whole range of presuppositions, rhetorical devices and performative features, posited in such a way that it was impossible for me to exist in a ‘neutral’ middle ground position as and anthropologist. Let me say something about these devices.

The pastor’s narrative is posited in highly charged symbolic terms, in Biblical exegeses on death/birth, spirit/flesh and blood/sacrifice. As he says: “The Spirit of God, enters you life and quickens your spirit, and the spirit that was there, because the sin of Adam comes back to life. He is brought back so to speak through an electric shock.” Being ‘brought back’ as ‘the spirit of God enters your life’ refers to how a person has received Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and is “born-again”. This means that a ‘second birth’ or a spiritual birth has taken place, where God, in the form of the Holy Spirit, has entered a person’s heart. This second birth changes the persons whereby the born-again starts to conform to the image or traits of Christ that birthed you. This birth first took place at Calvary when Jesus died on the cross. By Jesus shedding his blood, he forgave all sins and sinners by dying in their place, and when Jesus returned, conquering death, the sinners were born again, regenerated, having the spirit of God instilled in them. As a baby is totally dependent upon the mother to be born, being born by the spirit is totally dependent upon the grace of God.

After being born-again, God doesn’t ask for sacrifice in the form of blood of animals or humans, but by repentance and faith in the saving grace of Christ. A sacrifice is still due; the flesh bound self of the first birth that is offered upon in the act of believing. By the act of believing, the born-again embrace a Biblical narrative tradition that rewords or refashion their experiences in terms of a personal, triune God that intervenes in their daily life. As the JCC pastor said:

Now when your spirit is re-born, regenerated through the washing of the word of God, the mind has to be renewed and that is a process where you start to unlearn what was learned through life as a result of being a sinner the mind was programmed according to that life. [...] You have to learn through discipline and commitment, a discipline where you don't go about according to how you feel, because you emotions have been pre-programmed by the, you know you're sin life.

If Christians can reprogram your mind in the word of God, they will become notorious and overcomers in their daily life. [...]

The pastors narrative draw, in other words, on well-established parallels in evangelic culture; between the narratives of Christ's death (the gospel story) and personal conversion, between the cosmic order from the Bibles Garden of Eden, Calvary and the 'epic' of each born-again who, in the course of conversion, face the inevitable death of their past selves. The important here in evangelic narratives in general, and in the pastors narrative in particular, is the movement of transformation from 'dying' (coming under conviction) to resurrection (converting, being reborn). Where the 'mind has to be renewed,' 'according to the Word of God.' In other words: beginning to speak the words of God, acquiring the language of Christ, their dead souls are resurrected, instilling in the born-again believer the Holy Spirit, the very voice of God. In the same way that God restored man to himself by sacrificing his son on the cross, the unsaved must restore themselves by letting their past selves die, acknowledge their "sin nature" and that Christ died for your sins. And by restoring themselves as new persons, a new locus for self-understanding, a new moral authority and social identity is in the making.

This encounter between the new and the old self, between God and the unbeliever, as elaborated upon above, could be said to reproduce a narrative structured organized round a dialog, a dialogic encounter. As Jesus had dialogues with his disciples, triggering conversion, or as JCC Born-again in Wentworth engage in dialogue, witnessing to the unbelievers, so did the pastor witness to me in our dialogue. I too was a character in his story; his story was also about me.

And one day was asked to pray in the movement's daily prayer meetings. I was to go from being a listener to becoming a speaker, crossing a membrane into belief.

The prayer

Four months of fieldwork had passed. As usual, I was on my way to the daily prayers meeting, performed by the members of the Pentecostal Char-

ismatic movement (that at the outset of fieldwork turned out to become my focus of study). I was a bit late for prayer meeting that day, and a bit dizzy by the heated air, I parked the car outside the small brick building common in the area, and entered the door to the room where the prayer was held. The believers were already 'in the spirit', holding hands in prayer. A young man picked up my presence and had me joining the ring of hands.

'James', a young evangelist, often leading the prayers, got a revelation that morning saying that we should just try to practice the presence of the Lord, one by one, by praying both for the saved and the unsaved 'brothers' and 'sisters in Wentworth' "Pray for anyone!", he insisted, with his eyes closed, waiting for the person next to him to start praying. One member prayed for the unsaved one that had the potential for becoming fully born-again, people who were still in the World, governed by the flesh and not by the spirit. Another one prayed for the JCC church as such, and asked the Holy Spirit to start a revival that would multiply the numbers of believers in the area.

Eventually, I was the only one that had not prayed. Although I had participated in the meetings for four months, I was never asked to participate fully. Up until that day I had only been a listener of the gospel, but not a speaker. But just when I thought that the prayer session was over, 'James' said: "Today I am gonna do something I have never done before; I am gonna ask Andrè to pray for today's prayer and appreciate the Holy Spirits presence amongst us today." And yes, I did pray.

According to born-again belief, speaking the words of God is understood literally. When members pray, I was told, it is their voice speaking, but not their language. It is the language or the very voice of God that "speaks to their hearts", that "deals with them" Life, they say, is a passing thing, death could take place instantly and their life should therefore be in the Lords hands before it is too late.

I conceive conversion as a process of acquiring a specific religious language, a gospel narrative with and the standard plot of rebirth. In this sense, I was in prayer meeting initiated into conversion, transformed into another social position not only as a listener to the Gospel but as a speaker. In doing so, as an un-regenerated listener, my self did not get divided in the same sense when believers-to-become, at the moment of salvation, begins to appropriate in his or her inner speech the regenerated speaker's language and his or her worldview. Although the Holy Spirit did not begin enter my heart, I did, perform in prayer some of the type of language typically for the born-again Christian, although that is not to say that I was totally unaffected.

In my prayer, I tried as best possible to perform the type of language and the mode of interpreting of experiences that I had begun to pick up over

time. Gripping the counter arguments that you as readers most likely, in this very reading moment might pose: “how does he defend this ethical dishonesty?” A question that I myself most surely would have posed, I ask the reader first to consider the reminder of the paper.

Obviously, a crucial activity in the movement is to have people saved. In ‘native terms’ this activity is called witnessing (as spoken of above). The witnessing session normally includes the gospel story (death, burial and the resurrection of Jesus Christ) where the witness invites the unbelievers to receive Jesus the Lord in their hearts as their personal saviors. Also the witness may give narrative evidence of how he or she got to know Jesus or other examples of how Gods intervenes in their daily lives as well as didactic exegeses on heaven and hell, the origin of sin and the ways of the Devil.

Witnessing intends to create a spiritual crisis in the unbeliever. Sometimes the witnessing comes forwards through the Holy Spirit himself, without a born-again speaker initiating this, sometimes not. However shared among the ones I spoke to, a feeling of being lost, of despair, of frustration seemed to be onset of their conversion experiences, giving them a deep seated sense of impurity and separation from God as the direct divine intervention from God found place. And according to Harding (1995):

[...] The inner speech of “convicted sinners” is transformed as they are alienated from their previous voices (“the old self”, the “natural man”); cast into a limbo (“lost”, “in need,” “searching”) that is to say, somehow in a liminal state, a state of confusion and speechlessness; and begin to hear a new voice (“and inaudible voice,” “the Holy Spirit”.)

It is a sort of inner rite of passage that is completed when the one is born-again, regenerated and “washed in the words of God.” Many of my informants said to me that they experienced salvation as a personal reconciliation with God, where the supernatural imagination was set free and loosed from the World. Benetta Jules-Rosette (1976:135), who studied the Apostles of John Markanke in Africa, argued that the conversion experience was a powerful clash between two realms of thought and action, where the very terms of physical existence seemed to alter.

The conclusion

My bear presence in the religious activities of the JCC movement could, as I see it, could not be understood by the movement in any other way that I was on a journey towards God. Because; if you are willing to listen to the gospel, you are also seen as being willing to being witnessed to and thereby

willing to begin to convert. Listening to the gospel initiates the unwashed into the word of God, the language of Christ.

Moreover, as my friends and informants, I was on a number of margins (of course of a different character); my car broke down a number of times and I was not able to operate in the field efficiently. As a result of the car expenses, my budget became a constant worrying factor. Therefore I was bothered daily by the thought that I might not have enough money to stay in the field long enough to collect substantially enough data. Fundamentally, it was all about completing a long education and, in the long run, getting a job and establishing a safe family economy.

My friends and informants took my situation to be in resonance with the their own crisis, despair and frustration that had made them “susceptible” to conversion (not causing the conversion itself) starting to listen to the gospel. But where “susceptible” perhaps connotes passivity, I found it impossible to remain passive. In trying to make sense of the intense language of the JCC pastor and members, I had no time to “interpret” them into my own words as they talked. Caught between the conceptual and performative features of ritual language, between listening to it and speaking it, I had no “spare inner speech”,⁷ just taking the words and meaning in wilfully uncritical in trying to understand their utterances from their points of view, making their words mine.

Trying to understand the Pentecostal-Charismatic Born-again believer did not make me a believer myself, I did not go through a somewhat inner transformation, although I was probably transformed socially, as viewed by the JCC members. However, I was getting closer to the thin membrane of belief and disbelief as I began to acquire the knowledge, vision and sensibilities shared by the believers.

As I said earlier on, there was no middle ground between belief and disbelief in the course of fieldwork. You cannot both believe and disbelieve at the same time. More importantly; this is exactly what it means to be under conviction. You don't quite yet believe in the sense of declaring it in public, but you gradually come to respond to, and interpret, and act in the world as if you were a believer. But this is where it stops. In a way I was crossing a membrane into belief, not taking the final step of being saved where you cross another membrane; out of disbelief.

And the interesting irony remains: this space of belief and disbelief, the paradoxical space of overlap, is also the space of ethnography. We must enter it to do the work.

Notes

¹I take narrative to refer to the sequential report on two or several events in which assert their shared significance or relations to one another, as well as adding to Hayden Whites assertion that narratives also are related to, or is a function of “the impulse to moralize reality.” Also important to note in the context of this paper is the acknowledgment in anthropology from narrative theory that puts weight on the rhetorical power of narrative performance.

²This part on former understandings of conversion (is also implicit a part on former understanding of religions as such) is limited both in scope and selection. Figures like Emilie Durkheim and Eliade for example are not included. Also contemporary discussion on modernity and individuality as context for new religious life, as well as cultural phenomenological perspectives are absent, though highly relevant. These are discussions investigated more fully in my thesis in the making.

³A more detailed discussion on Weber however reveals his complexity and his intellectual development. For example, in his later works he withdrew from the rationalist view of history in favor of a more conditional and circumstantial historiography, where he sees that the social realization of religious values also depend on their formulation and implementation by different social “carriers”. Also, he considered that doctrinal canonization had something to do with the struggle and tension between competing groups for the control of the community. Further, he became interested in the doctrinal revelation itself; the revivalist’s formulation of religious truth by prophet-intellectuals inspired by charismatic. This he regarded as different from the more public institutionalization of canon, a result of clerical struggles. The charismatic prophet and his visions were in Weber’s eyes, the voice of anti-traditionalism that had higher success in promoting higher religious ideals.

⁴I do not mean to imply that it is only the social practice of witnessing that separates the believers and the unbelievers. The interesting feature of witnessing that I find worthwhile considering is its performative character, its character as a ritual utterance that, as Austin (1975) and Searle (1969, 1979) writes, are not only demonstrative or descriptive, but are performative acts, they are *doing* things. Saying something is doing something. It is this perspective I try to use on certain personal made methodological and theoretical reflections on what “really” happened to me in the field. By doing so, and indeed limited in scope, I have left out, perhaps more central aspects or ritual life in JCC in general, and the rhetoric of conversion in specific, that is the emotional, experimental, and embodied dimension. Conversion lies not only in the utterance of the words of God, but it is an important facet of it. Moreover, as something that may be shadowed in this paper, conversion, as a genre in JCC ritual practice, indeed also involves the production and reproduction of self and social identity as a member of a movement. In this respect, a discussion on the relation between language and experience are left out in this paper, but is elaborated on in my thesis.

⁵For Pentecostals, baptism in the Holy Ghost, or the Holy Spirit, refers to an experience whose basis is believed to be found in the Jerusalem event of Pentecost found in Acts 2:1–4. At the beginning of Jesus ministry, John the Baptist preached: “Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4) where many confessed their sins and were baptized in water. Importantly, he declared about Jesus that “I will baptize you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8). About three years later, Jesus talked with his disciples about the promise from the Father, a promise of a gift: the Holy Spirit, which one would receive as baptism in the Holy Spirit. The promise was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost where “all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit”, and in subsequent years the ones who repented was forgiven. Contemporary Pentecostals claim that they have received this gift, whereas the charismatic (as JCC) add that the ones who are baptized by the Spirit also involves receiving certain spiritual or charismatic gifts, the so called fruits of the Spirit.

⁶A perspective applied by B. Ray in his *Performative utterances* in African Rituals. In *History of Religions* 13, 16-35

⁷According to Bakhtin, the listener can never make the speaker’s speech his own. The dialog, from the listener’s point of view: “As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker (that is, the listener becoming a speaker) populates it with his won intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral language ..., but rather it exists in other peoples mouth, in other peoples contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own ...Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult duplicated process” (293.294)

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