

# An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of a Religious Conversion

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**Abstract** Religious conversion is an important phenomenon in contemporary religious climate, but existing psychology research work is mostly based on quantitative methods. In an attempt to contribute to this field, the present study proposes a qualitative exploration of religious conversion. The in-depth interview of a French woman is examined in order to investigate her experience of religious conversion, 40 years prior. The interview was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, with the purpose of revealing how the participant experienced the process of religious conversion, what was its impact on her life, identity and personality and how she coped with this impact. The four emerging themes were: conflicted relationship with Judaism, the pursuit of a spiritual quest, changes after conversion and life after conversion. These themes painted the image of a powerful spiritual transformation, a profound and dynamic lifelong process, integrating concepts and practices, life changes and developments. The findings are explained with the help of available literature.

**Keywords** Religious conversion · Interpretative phenomenological analysis · Judaism · Buddhism · Single case study

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## Introduction

This paper examines the spiritual transformation, challenges, changes in behaviour, social life and personality of a religious convert, and it aims to describe the experience and motivation of religious conversion.

## Religious Conversion

Religious conversion has long been of interest in psychological research. First systematic study in this area, “*A Study of Conversion*”, was done by Starbuck (1897) who continued his inquiry by publishing “*The psychology of religion: An empirical study of the growth of religious consciousness*” (1901). The following year, William James presented a speech on religious conversion on the topic of “*Natural Religion*” and introduced the subject of his lecture as “*the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self-hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities*” (James 1902).

After these remarkable works, which remain pertinent to the date, the psychologists’ interest for religious conversion waned, with very few researches materialising until the 1960–1970, when again, theories regarding motivation, external circumstances and subsequent changes have been formulated by psychology researchers (Glock and Stark 1965; Beckford 1978; Lofland and Skonovd 1981). McGuire (2008) defined religious conversion as:

*a transformation of one’s self concurrent with a transformation of one’s basic meaning system (...) It often changes the sense of who one is and how one belong in the social situation. Conversions also transform the way the individual perceives the rest of the society and his or her personal place in it, altering one’s view of the world.*

Research has documented personal, social and situational factors which could influence people’s decision to convert, by raising their awareness to their dissatisfaction with their current belief system, which cannot “*explain or give meaning to experiences and events*” (Harnes 2009).

According to the General Social Surveys, religious module (1988) conducted by National Opinion Research Centre in USA, the reasons given for a person’s first change of religion break down to 37% mentioning marriage or family, 25% friends or location, 18% issues of theology and 19% with other reasons (Barro and Hwang 2007). Lofland and Skonovd (1981) described six motives for religious conversion: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive. Gartrell and Shannon (1985) furthered Lofland and Skonovd’s research and suggested that “*conversion hinges on actors’ perceptions of the expected rewards of converting relative to not converting*”.

Rambo pointed out that “*most people who become involved in religious conversions are in fact active agents, and not passive victims*” (Rambo 1998) and that “*conversion to be understood in all its richness and complexity, the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and religious studies must all be taken into account*” (Rambo 1998).

McGuire supported Rambo’s point of view, highlighting that “*if individuals can satisfactorily handle experiences and events within the framework of their meaning system, they have no desire to seek alternative meaning system for their lives*” (McGuire 2008).

She also mentioned that, because religious conversion produces changes in the convert's meaning system and identity, it had social, psychological and ideational components, "*the social component consists of the interaction between the recruit and other circles of associates (parents, friends, co-workers), the psychological component refers to emotional and affective aspects of conversion as well as changes in values and attitudes, the ideational component includes the actual ideas the convert embraces or rejects during the process*". She described these ideas as being simple set of beliefs which justified the new belief system and negated the previous one.

Barro and Hwang (2007) explained that, with greater participation and belief, also came an increased conversion rate because of the heightened importance of formal religion for the subject, which supports earlier findings, suggesting that the conversions tend to favour stricter religions (Swatos et al. 2002).

The subject of the present study converted from Judaism to Buddhism.

## Judaism

Judaism is one of the oldest monotheist religions that still exists today. Although it never achieved dominant numbers, it continues to exert a profound influence in the modern western world. Jewish beliefs centre on the conviction that there is only one God. This was a minority view in its time, but monotheism is now dominant in the western world—thanks to the influence of Judaism on the powerful religions of Christianity and Islam. Today, approximately 14 million people identify themselves as Jews. The Shoah (also known as the Holocaust, from a Greek word meaning "sacrifice by fire") was initiated by the members of the National Socialist (Nazi) Party, which seized power in Germany in 1933.

The Nazis believed in a doctrine of racial superiority, centring on the idea that that people of Northern European descent were somehow better than members of all other races—especially the Jews, who were considered unworthy of life (Judaism—Religious facts 2016).

## Buddhism

Buddhism is an atheist religion with 488–535 million followers. To many, Buddhism goes beyond religion and is more of a philosophy or "way of life". It is a philosophy because philosophy means "love of wisdom" and the Buddhist path can be summed up as: to lead a moral life, to be mindful and aware of thoughts and actions and to develop wisdom and understanding. Buddhism explains a purpose to life, it explains apparent injustice and inequality around the world, and it provides a code of practice or way of life that leads to true happiness. Buddhism is a belief system which is tolerant of all other beliefs or religions. Buddhists do not preach and try to convert, only explain if an explanation is sought (White 1993).

Considering the growing importance of religion in the global climate, it is evident that religious conversion gained an immediate importance for psychological research, even more considering the scarcity of scientific studies in this topic. Moreover, "*current psychological and sociological literature devoted to the phenomenon of conversion has moved away from the causes and consequences of conversion and the stages of the conversion process, which have occupied most researchers' attention for the last 40 years, to the more*

*recent narrative-social-constructivist approach*” (Sremac 2016). Recent researchers have been concerned with the relationship between religious disaffiliation and health (Fenelon and Danielsen 2016), between apostasy/conversion and social competence (Longo and Kim-Spoon 2014) or between religious switching and pathways to adulthood (Glass et al. 2015), indicating a clear interest in exploring more the influence of religious choice on health and wellbeing.

The majority of the literature on religious conversions is represented by review papers or theoretical papers (Paloutzian et al. 2013; Hood 1996; Lofland and Skonovd 1981; Rambo 1993) and quantitative research (Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998; Kirkpatrick 1997; Kose 1996; Kox et al. 1991). While they provide valuable analysis of occurrences, causal relationships and size of religious conversion, they cannot capture the inner world of the religious converts and the meaning the conversion takes for them.

In the present study, interpretative phenomenological analysis was used, for exploring what happens in the intimate world of the participant. IPA is a qualitative method with an idiographic focus, aiming to give insights on how a person makes sense of a phenomenon, usually carrying a personal significance. It has its origins in phenomenology, ideography and hermeneutics, and it is focused on revealing the personal experience, perception and account regarding a specific event or situation, in our case the religious conversion. This approach has been gaining popularity in the last few years and was developed by Jonathan Smith (Smith et al. 1995).

## Objectives

To understand subject’s experiences that lead to the decision to convert.

To explore the process of conversion, the changes in the life and identity of the convert.

## Research Questions

What motivates a religious conversion?

How does a person experience the process of conversion?

What is the impact of religious conversion on the life of the convert?

How does the new convert cope with the changes brought by the religious conversion in her life?

## Methods

The participant was a French woman, age 76, of Buddhist religious affiliation, currently living in Spain with her husband. She converted to Buddhist religion at the age of 35. For protecting the identity of the subject, the subject was named Kate in this article.

Recruitment was purposive, the subject was selected through friends and in order to facilitate a high level of disclosure, the interview was conducted by the second researcher, who spoke fluent French and shared a similar cultural background. The subject was not known to the researchers prior to the interview. The participant received no compensation for taking part in this study. After the second researcher explained the purpose of the interview to the subject, informed consent has been taken before collecting the data. All procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or

national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

After an extensive literature review, a semi-structured interview was developed by the second researcher, under the supervision of the first researcher, following IPA guidelines and adapted for single case study (Eatough and Smith 2006; Visser and Smith 2006), with the idea of letting the participant speak freely and use the questions as a means to move forward in her discourse, while allowing the follow-up of new unexpected avenues. The questions moved from general to more specific and delicate topics, regarding her family and personal beliefs.

The participant was interviewed privately by the second researcher for 2 h, using the semi-structured interview. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, the interview took place in a private room in the residence of the participant, in Spain.

In the beginning of the interview, the second researcher briefly explained the study aims and encouraged the participant to speak freely and as detailed as desired, without a time or topic constraint. At the end of the interview, the second researcher had a small discussion with the participant about the way she felt about the interview, the questions, the topic and the sensitive issues discussed. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim to French by the second researcher, then translated into English by a native speaker of French and then anonymised. The participant signed an informed consent form prior to data collection.

In line with IPA's idiographic approach, a complete data analysis was conducted for the transcript, by the third and fourth of the researchers. The analysis of the transcript started with a thorough reading, so that the researchers get a feel of the story, followed by several systematic readings, taking notes of thoughts, key words, points of view and attitudes (Smith et al. 2009). The side comments were later used by the researchers to identify possible themes and subthemes, which were later compared to the text to make sure the sense of the words was kept. After a final reading of the transcript in parallel with the emerged themes, these were revised, recombined and clustered to present a clear image of the participant's story. The table of themes and subthemes was created by the two researchers comparing notes and auditing each other's individual work and was revised by the first researcher (Smith et al. 2009).

## Results

From the analysis of the interview transcript, four themes emerged: (1) Conflicted relationship with Judaism having as subthemes (a) religious persecution and (b) high attachment to father; (2) The pursuit of a spiritual quest having as subthemes (a) longing for meaning and (b) religious revelation; (3) Changes after conversion having as subthemes (a) acceptance, (b) awareness, (c) responsibility and (d) the practice of meditation and mantra chanting; and (4) Life after conversion having as subthemes (a) patriarchal views in Buddhism and (b) critical view of society. What follows is a detailed analytic description of each theme, supported by quotes from the transcript.

### Conflicted (Complex) Relationship with Judaism

The participant had a very difficult childhood, suffering from discrimination, imprisonment and persecution during the second world war, on account of her religion. Her family was

arrested and imprisoned for several months in various facilities in France, waiting for processing and eventually be sent to the extermination camps. She recollected those events with a lot of emotion, explaining that, at the time, she couldn't understand the reasons behind her and her family's persecution.

In prison were people who have done very bad things, but we were in prison because we were Jews. So I couldn't understand why... When you are a child, you can't understand why they put us there...

At the age of 6, she could not understand why she and her family suffered without having done anything, showing feelings of confusion, indignation and outrage. In her mind, one should not have been punished for one's religion, especially children.

We had nothing left, because the people who denounced Jews used to come to their home, after they were taken, to rob them of everything they had in their homes.

After spending months in incertitude, in insalubrious conditions, in the cold, without proper food and separated from her family, she was finally reunited with them and sent back to her home in France. Upon their return, the living conditions did not improve, because her house had been robbed by the same people who had denounced them and they were left with nothing.

She faced another disillusion, when the stigma of being a Jew followed her at school.

So we went to school, where we had a teacher who said "we have done this to Jews, it's not good..." and I did not want her to say that, I just wanted to be like everyone...After this, my school mates went home and told their families we are Jews...So practically, we have returned from that, we weren't dead but we came back to hear "they are Jews".

For the 6 year old, who just wanted to blend in, to be like everyone else, she found herself again side-lined, again wearing the heavy mark of her religion. She felt overwhelmed again, because she had thought that the ordeal was behind her. The difficult experience of religious persecution made her question the existence of God.

I didn't understand how I am supposed to believe in God, I couldn't believe in God, because how could God allow what happened during that time: tortured children, people burnt, all those horrors... So for me, I said, I don't see God. From the beginning, I was atheist, I didn't believe in God, I didn't believe in anything at all

Perhaps before the war, she had had an image of God as protector, benefactor and creator of the world, which got shattered. Unlike her family, which did not become atheist after the war, the participant was very young and her religious beliefs were not very developed. She denied the existence of God because she believed that the God she was supposed to believe in would have intervened and saved her family from the atrocities of war. Instead of re-evaluating her expectations in the power of God, she chose to deny its existence, in an "all or nothing" attitude which characterises several passages of her interview. Her atheism became so deeply embedded in her belief system, that she considered it as a categorical condition in choosing Buddhism:

It didn't demand to believe in God, because if it would have asked that in order to be Buddhist, I would have never become a Buddhist.

Although she had denounced God as consequence of religious persecution and she had converted to an atheist religion, she revealed a difficulty in formally renounce Judaism, her father's religion. She mentioned in several moments her deep attachment to her father.

There was no demand or even advice to deny my religion, my father's religion... My father never asked me questions and I didn't want to hurt him by telling him. I was very attached to my father...

Her father was a religious man and the Jewish religion was a connection Kate shared with him. To formally renounce Judaism would symbolically mean to cut out that connection and she could never bring herself to do it. Even after "taking refuge" in Buddhism, she could not reveal the conversion to her father, only to her mother to which she was not as attached.

It was obvious that Kate had complex feelings regarding her former religion, on one side rejecting the existence of God and resenting being persecuted, on the other side holding on to Judaism because it was a strong connection with her father, which she loved deeply. She seemed unable to embrace it or let it go fully.

At this point, Kate's motivation is revealed. Childhood trauma, coupled with disconnect from the religion she was born in and a deep need for meaning, has led to this decision.

### **The Pursuit of a Spiritual Quest**

The participant talked enthusiastically about her search for meaning and about the discovery of Buddhism. Since she never considered that Judaism satisfied her spiritual aspirations, quenched her spiritual thirst, she always felt a need for something more ever since childhood. This issue had surfaced in discussions with her sister and with her friends, who have shown support and even offered ideas and resources.

I had a spiritual aspiration, but I didn't know what it was. I said that I don't know but I could feel there is something there, that will make my life whole, which will be of utmost importance, to which I will dedicate my life, but I didn't know then what it was.

Kate's search for meaning emerged spontaneously, from her desire to have a purpose, to do something important with her life which would give her a feeling of wholeness, of completeness. In childhood and adolescence, she felt strongly that there must be such aim for her, even though at that time, she was unaware of what this could be.

I started singing and composing music, I loved it, I felt "yes, this is what I want to dedicate my life to". I found it amazing, so I decided that was what I wanted to do all my life

Around 25 [...] she told me about a book, a Tibetan book that she thought I would be interested in.

Her life passions, music and Buddhism came to her life one after the other, complementing each other in many ways. After finding purpose and freedom of expression in music, she recounted not feeling entirely complete, because finding what she wanted to do in her life did not answer her spiritual aspirations.

So I have read the book [recommended by my friends] called "Le Message des Tibétains" which was written by a French author called Arnaud Desjardin. And

when I read that book, I had a revelation: this is my family. My spiritual family. It happened immediately.

I thought “this is my family of thought”

The first encounter with Buddhism was life changing for Kate. She felt intensely connected with her “*family of thought*”, maybe because the concepts she found in the book were in complete agreement with her own personal views. Her adoption of the new found “*spiritual family*” was instantaneous and candid, like filling a void in her life. Her feelings were complex, on one side enthusiasm and another side, despair from not being able to come into contact with the new found community.

So everything I read in that book corresponded to what I was thinking, I found a complete correspondence, and I saw the photos of Kalu Rimpoche and all the grand masters, which I later met, all of them and I received their blessings, but at that point I was crying because I was thinking I met my family, they are in Tibet and I would never be able to go to Tibet, I would never meet them, I had found my family and I would never be able to see them...I was literally crying....

Kate’s spiritual quest was challenging because the distance and difficulties in travelling at that time gave her little hope of being reunited with her new found family. When Kate realised the unlikelihood of her project, she felt immediately overwhelmed, perhaps a natural reaction to the perception of an insurmountable obstacle. It was obvious that her involvement in Buddhism was already substantial at that point and that the distance had made her feel hopeless and deeply sad.

Soon after, we left to India, in Kashmir, and then we decided to go to Dharamshala. [...]

We went to Macleod Ganj, where Dalai Lama was, [...] we met disciples of Lama Zopa and Lama Yeshe, who were all going to Kathmandu. So we [...] went to Kathmandu next, where we met Lama Yeshe [our guru], Lama Zopa, we received teachings and we have made one month of meditation, after which we have finally adopted the Buddhism. It was something completely for us, which we searched since always. But anyways, there is a ceremony, which is called “to take refuge”, in which you manifest your desire to follow this path. “To take refuge” means you take refuge in Buddha, in Buddha’s teachings (dharma) and in Sangha (the community of all monks and masters).

In the previous passages, Kate seemed to struggle alone on this spiritual path, but after a while she started using the pronoun “we”, referring to her and her husband. This seemed no longer a solitary road. In addition, the quest became realisable, with the help of her husband, which supported and shared her spiritual aspirations. The climax of the story, represented by the moment they “*took refuge*” into Buddhism, was described with emotion, Kate embedding her story with both accounts of facts and feelings.

What convinced me [...] was the importance of love and compassion, more than the philosophy, more than anything. Even if it sounds utopic and unrealisable, the fact that the goal was the happiness of all, for me was a magnificent motivation.

The choice to follow the Buddhist path was an emotional one as well as rational and intellectual. She was looking for a selfless, compassionate purpose, and Buddhism offered

her exactly that. The fact that the goal of Buddhist doctrine was utopic did not act as deterrent and Kate continued her exploration.

Also the philosophy is very intelligent, when one discovers the arcane of Buddhist philosophy is amazing, it is so complex, goes so far, has an understanding of the universe, and the world which is fabulous...it is a science, not a religion. It is a religion also, in the sense that there is practice, there is an understanding of the human potential, which is infinite.

At the end of her quest, after following teachings and practices, Kate gained a complex understanding of Buddhist concepts, which allowed her to take an informed decision. She did not seem to jump impulsively in conversion and take the decision blindly. At the point of “*taking refuge*” her heart and mind were fully into it and she knew that she had made a choice for life.

I felt a huge change. I realised that I had never been taught in this way, that I had never received initiations that opened my heart and consciousness.

The conversion had a huge impact on Kate, similar to the impact of “*Les message des tibetains*”. She had been captivated by the Buddhist philosophy and did everything possible to follow this path. In many ways, Buddhism seemed a religion tailor-made for Kate’s personality and desires, not only offering her new beliefs and practices, but also offering her support for self-realisation and enhancement of her already existing positive traits.

### Changes After Conversion

The changes that Kate noticed post her conversion were some subtle and took time to develop, like her awareness, and some were immediate and obvious, like integration in her life of love and compassion. However, the conversion did not generate only changes, but also brought support for some personality aspects, which got enhanced, like openness and extraversion.

In Buddhism, it is very important to consider all beings as equals, without preference, even your enemies, who want to be happy. If they do harm, it is out of ignorance. What hit me very hard was to discover that until this point, compassion was a theme that was alien to me. It had never appeared in anything that I had been taught. And it gave me a great faith into Buddhism. Because I was taught that in Buddhism, if you don’t develop love and compassion, you can never reach anywhere. It is fundamentally important. Before, for me, love was limited to the love I had for my companion or for my family... but it was very limited.

The Buddhist teachings she received were an eye opener for Kate, explaining in a different manner concepts she already knew, which received a new meaning. Instead of remaining abstract concepts, love and compassion gained a new practical dimension for Kate. Buddhism was offering her guidance on a path to being compassionate and seeing all people as equal. As she revealed, Kate was coming from a consumerist, individualistic and bourgeois environment and her aspirations lead her to rebel against it and to desire wellbeing for all human beings. Considering her history of religious persecution and discrimination, equality of all beings carried an acute importance for Kate.

This manner in which Buddhism breaks the limitation and to show you that each being needs this love and compassion and that it is fundamental for you to open your

heart and be able to give, to share, to rejoice whenever someone has something good happening to them instead of feeling jealousy.

Apart from a new understanding of love, compassion and equality, she also gained a new perspective on jealousy. Kate learned to manage her negative feelings and interact with each person with a compassionate and supportive mind. What she learned from Buddhism, helped her relate deeper to others, feel accepted and accepting in turn.

Not only [I became more aware] but what I think about it, what is my position about it, what I accept what I refuse, if I refuse something, why...

Meanwhile, Kate also became more aware of herself, of her desires and emotions. In a journey of self-exploration, she started questioning herself, her thoughts and actions. Awareness and self-exploration, qualities already present in Kate to some extent, were enhanced and structured by her Buddhist practice.

And it starts with you. You can't say "I will wait for others to change and once that's done, then only will I change". No. You understands that it start with you, that if it doesn't start with you, then it will never change.

A crucial concept she integrated in her life was responsibility. One cannot expect change, while not changing oneself, and Buddhism pushes the idea of starting the transformation within oneself, before expecting anything from the world. Considering herself responsible, she also learned patience and the importance of each individual for the world around. It is possible that responsibility gave her a feeling of empowerment, allowing her to feel in control. In addition, responsibility supported her need of freedom. It was vital for Kate to feel it was in her power to change her environment and her world, the way she was unable to in childhood.

The day you discover you're intolerant, you made a big step in your life. Because you know what is the enemy you have to fight.

The new attained awareness and deepened self-knowledge allowed her to see the weak points in herself, the areas on which she needed to work.

I have nothing to hide. So this was spontaneously present in me. It just opened more, got amplified and became more structured, thought about, more deliberate. More about helping others whenever I could. But mostly communicate. And every time I could enable someone to go forward a bit it was by listening. Even if you do nothing, listening is already a lot.

Before converting, Kate was continuously looking for acceptance, for connection with people and for ways in which she can be of help to them. She found new ways of realising that connection after conversion, by connecting to the Buddhist community and listening to peoples' problems after meditation classes, and later even leading meditation gatherings on her own.

So everything I learned in Buddhism that enables one to be happy, I use in small touches... but I don't want people to become Buddhist. I just want them to be well in their skin.

She respected the Buddhist views on proselytism and propagated only her knowledge, without openly discussing Buddhism. By accepting and helping others without asking them to convert, she showed a complete integration of the Buddhist philosophy. She did not

think that, because she decided to convert, conversion is good for everyone, and she supported the idea that people can develop by following their specific set of beliefs and practice. She reiterated that Buddhist philosophy was open-minded about other religions and did not see only one right way for everyone to grow.

You can't know how it works, but it does work. It is the strength of the energy of the mantra

If you have faith and the mantra, miraculous things can happen. It is faith that produces miracles. Meditation, mantra... meditation is mostly your ability to seat, remain tranquil, immobile and observe your mind. You see what comes up, what comes out... but you don't reject, judge or condemn anything, you let everything pass as if it didn't belong to you.

Kate immersed herself in an exploration of the changes brought in her life by meditation and chanting. She immediately integrated them in her everyday life. It was obvious that both these practices were giving her peace, harmony, comfort and even solace in her most difficult times.

As shown, Kate's spiritual quest developed horizontally as Kate found music, Shri Aurobindo, a supportive life partner and Buddhism, as well as vertically as Kate deepened her knowledge and changed herself in alignment with her new spiritual philosophy. Her horizontal search had ended; meanwhile, her vertical spiritual search continues, always learning, developing, inquiring and changing.

### **Life After Conversion**

While Kate conversion had a clear positive impact on Kate's life and she integrated fully the Buddhist concepts and practice in her everyday life, some of her spiritual challenges remained unsolved at the time of the interview. She seemed to have issues with the patriarchal view held by the society, as observed in the first part of the interview when she complained about her not receiving initiation in Judaism because of her gender and acknowledged being intolerant, fact supported by numerous instances in the text, in which she exhibits critical views of the society.

What I saw was that my brother got initiated in the religion, while me, being a girl, and did not receive any initiation. Women were supposed to bear children, not to be initiated in the religion.

She recalled struggling with the male-dominant societal norms which had taken away her opportunity to learn and explore her spiritual side. Kate shows her deep frustration with a patriarchal society, by caricaturing the status of the woman in the society which reduces her role solely to procreation.

Let me tell you something true: the only thing that disturbs me in Buddhism, is that until now, there has been a certain acceptance of patriarchal ways. Because for example nuns didn't have access to the same level of initiation as monks. I believe that given the fact that this world is a very patriarchal world, for example, Tantra was made something very secret, in particular because it said how essential women were for men to achieve enlightenment...

After conversion, she felt disappointed again, encountering the same patriarchal view of women in Buddhism, where nuns do not receive the same level of initiation as the monks.

Not only that the patriarchal system in religion has prohibited women to get equal respect and to gain knowledge, but it also kept secret certain aspects of philosophy in which women hold an essential role.

When people are ignorant, feminine capacities are put down. Men have to be superior.

Through a strong statement, Kate shows on one side her dislike of the way society disregards the abilities of women and on the other side, a strong belief that the world needs to be less ignorant in order to accept the equality of women. She refers to the way things are in the present and her statement hints to a hope for a more open and accepting world.

They had to fight for it but they finally managed to obtain this. It became more liberal. But I do regret not receiving more teachings from women that were great masters, and there have been many. Personally, I dream of being taught by female masters who would have a different way of approaching the same things.

Though she was disturbed with the patriarchal system still prevailing in Buddhism, Kate showed hope when recounting the fact that nuns took a stand and brought change by fighting for equality. She considered these changes as part of a greater process, a transformation within Buddhism, which would bring front more women masters, whose teachings would contribute differently to the Buddhist doctrine.

Tara is a woman who reached enlightenment with a terrible desire to protect all beings from all fears. When you have faith in Tara, even if you are in a terrible situation, you see her in your mind, you visualise her, her beauty is extreme, her luminosity is perfect, she fills you with light, it is as if you were surrounded with diamonds... nothing can harm you.

Kate's feminist views are embodied in the captivating depiction of Tara, her favourite deity in Buddhist philosophy. Tara's image hints also at a perfect integration of the Buddhist practice of visualisation and meditation. She chose the feminine Bodhisattva as protector against fears and harm, showing again her deep trust and respect for feminine abilities.

The other challenge for Kate, before and after conversion, was managing her critical view of others and her intolerance. While her tendency to criticise escaped her awareness, she demonstrated a good understanding of her intolerance, perhaps due to her self-exploration post-conversion.

[Tantra] can only be misunderstood because people's minds are polluted. So women were always put down. I mean not exactly because they recognise many women were great masters. But these women had the wisdom to never demonstrate their spiritual levels. They always stayed behind.

In this sentence, both her vulnerable points come together: Kate sees society as patriarchal, as discriminating against women and considers the cause of this to be the pollution of minds. Unlike in the previous similar statement: "*When people are ignorant, feminine capacities are put down. Men have to be superior*", this sentence denotes a more pessimistic and categorical tone.

We are so materialistic in the west that we give the material a huge importance. People get scandalised by what they can't understand. And we shouldn't disturb

people with things they cannot understand, that are beyond their capacities and that lead them to misjudge adepts of Buddhism.

The pessimistic tone continues, Kate seeing people as materialistic, judgmental and easily scandalised, especially when things are beyond their comprehension. Instead of promoting love and compassion, Kate thought that it is useless to try to reason with “*the polluted minds*”.

He taught me that sometimes, others could be used like a garbage to empty our baggage, because we want to talk about ourselves, because it is the ego that wants to show how interesting it is, because you are interested by your “me” and believe anyone would be interested by it. And we find it, all our thoughts, extraordinary. We cherish our thoughts as if they were a pure marvellous juice.

Intolerance complements the critical views towards the society, and Kate seems oblivious to it. While trying to help a man by listening to him, she cannot help herself from judging that person. Even the scope of that person’s desire to confide comes under scrutiny. Perhaps she started seeing “*ego*” as an undesirable feature post-conversion, and by starting to perceive it in others, she is also helping herself in self-exploration.

Each one finds himself so fascinating, were so interested in our problems, our loves, our attachments... in everything the ego feed upon. This is what Buddhism taught me. To know myself, to discover all those gross things about the ego that we carry inside ourselves.

This powerful statement reiterates what Kate suggested before. The critical view is not only oriented towards others, but also inwards in an attempt to improve and develop. She felt that Buddhism helped her acknowledge her intolerance towards her partner and others and become aware of her “*ego*” issues. While at times pessimistic and categorical, her overall tone was hopeful and calm. By believing she could change, she believed that everyone in the world could change and considered herself as a part of the society.

Kate showed hope that both these issues which produce a lifelong struggle, would be prevailed over, which supported that spiritual transformation was not a momentary event, but a dynamic, lifelong process, with difficulties and triumphs.

## Discussion

This research provides insight into how a person’s experience of religious conversion, by exploring their changes, challenges and feelings and by revealing the interplay between their history, religious conversion and current situation.

The interpretative phenomenological analysis with idiographic approach was chosen with the goal of understanding what happens inside the world of one single participant by using their’ own words and placing them in the context of their life experiences. It also aimed at obtaining a deep and wide image of religious conversion and comprehend how it affects the life of the convert. The results show that history, context, environment and self are all decisive factors which can influence the intention to convert in an unpredictable way. The impact of each factor is varying for each convert, and it is unclear what determines in the end a person’s decision to carry out the intention of converting. As the experiences lived and described in this research suggest, it is the complex interaction between emotions and beliefs that often underlines the process of conversion. Significantly,

“contemporary researchers and theologians share the belief that there is no one cause of spiritual transformation, no one process, and no one simple consequence of that process” (Schwartz 2000).

Kate was going through a contemporary religious conversion, characterised by gradual development, self-realisation and behaviour and belief change, in which she was an active, seeking agent (Richardson 1985). Her conversion was also experimental, because Kate searched for meaning in Buddhist philosophy and practice and takes the help of several teachers, who show her the path (Lofland and Skonovd 1981). Similarly to a previous qualitative study, which found women’s sense of happiness in their new faith as a dominant theme (Charoenwong et al. 2017), Kate expressed her continuous enthusiasm for her embraced religion.

According to Rambo’s model (1993), religious conversion takes place within a dynamic context, “encompasses a vast panorama of conflicting, confluent, and dialectical factors that both facilitate and repress the process of conversion”. In Kate’s case, her childhood’s experiences, the history of religious persecution and her revolutionary appetite are laying the ground work for converting to Buddhism. As previously found, “religious transformation may be an important resource for coping with lifetime trauma” (Krause et al. 2017). Her pro-activeness, her need of being different, of doing something meaningful are not conventional. About this type of quest, Rollo May wrote “many people feel they are powerless to do anything effective with their lives. It takes courage to break out of the settled mould, but most find conformity more comfortable. This is why the opposite of courage in our society is not cowardice, it is conformity. Many people feel they are powerless to do anything effective with their lives. It takes courage to break out of the settled mould, but most find conformity more comfortable. This is why the opposite of courage in our society is not cowardice, it is conformity” (Rollo May 1991). Maslow (1998) agrees by writing “one can choose to go back toward safety or forward toward growth. Growth must be chosen again and again; fear must be overcome again and again”.

The crisis stage was not dramatic in Kate’s case, it was more a culmination of contextual issues in a process of self-exploration and “search for salvation”, in which she proved an active agent. The encounter is decisive, starting with the discovery of music in which she found meaning for the first time, followed by her meeting with the friend who gave her the first book about Buddhism and lastly, the encounter that will last a lifetime, with her husband, who proved to be not only a supporter but also an active participant in their joint quest. Following the encounters, the quest stage becomes a story of search, of deepening understandings, of integrating concepts and exploring the Buddhist philosophy, at the end of which Kate finds herself reunited with the community she has been searching for, her “family of thought”. Victor Frankl (1984) wrote that “man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions but not on conditions”, which explains why the obstacles in her way, even though initially perceived as insurmountable, did not change her mind.

This interaction with her adopted religious group intensifies during the time of teachings, travels and explorations. The commitment stage “is the fulcrum of the change process” in which Kate decides, alongside her husband to “take refuge”, after making sure the new religion accepted her fully, not even requiring for her to formally de-convert from Judaism. According to Rambo, “a specific turning point or decision is often required and/or experienced” and the interaction with Lama, in which she received the confirmation that she does not need to formally renounce “her father’s religion” signifies exactly that. The commitment moment was an intense and emotional experience, taken whole-heartedly and

without a doubt. In Kate's case, the consequences were not dramatic, because she chose not to disclose her conversion to her family, except to her mother who accepted her decision and at the same time, because her environment and circle of friends were already very open to spiritual transformations. This is often the case when the conversion is simply a case of self-realisation, when religion supports and enhances traits already present and brings harmony in the life of the convert (Rambo 1993).

In Kate's case, the religious conversion generated a profound spiritual and life transformation and according to Hood (1996), "*a spiritual transformation is a profound change in the self*". This change cannot be attributed to life changes or maturation, but to the gradual process of spiritual quest, through which the transformed self emerges.

Victor Frankl (1984) sees this meaning of life as a "*self-transcendence of human existence*" and explains that "*it denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something or someone, other than oneself—be it a meaning to fulfil or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself*". Kate embraced this change of self, by adopting new belief, concerns—she was concerned with the suffering of others, interests—she deepened her understanding of Buddhist concepts and furthered her practice and behaviours—she continuously struggled to be at the help of others and minimise their suffering. She saw this emerged new self as an enhanced version of herself, a person with a deeper understanding of compassion, love and suffering, who was also hopeful to make a change in others. During her quest, she interacted and created lasting bonds with people from the religious community, which is one of the three jewels of Buddhism (Sangha—signifying the Buddhist community of monks, nuns, novices and laity). According to Hood (1996) it is important for the emergence of the new self that the "*transformation entails a religious framework within which the transformed self is described, acts, and is recognized by others*". After being fully accepted within her "*thought family*" as she described the Buddhist community, she continued to follow the practice—meditation, chanting, practicing love and compassion, doing no harm to others—and to deepen her understanding of Buddhist philosophy throughout her life, which according to Hood (1996) represents a profound transformation of self.

For all that, Kate disclosed that, in many ways, finding her spiritual family did not change who she was, many of her existing traits being enhanced post-religious conversion. This finding is supported by Paloutzian et al. (1999), who consider that spiritual transformation does not have a significant effect on the basic functions of personality—extraversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness and neuroticism. Indeed Kate was already extroverted, curious and open to new experiences, open towards people, seeker of self-actualisation, outgoing, compassionate and spontaneous. Kate's transformation was at the level of the mid-level functions of personality—such as goals, feelings, attitudes and behaviours, fact which is again supported by Paloutzian et al. (1999) who found that "self-defining" personality functions (such as identity, life meaning) do change dramatically after a spiritual transformation.

In Kate's case, "*religion has the transformative power to create radical personal change*." (Pargament 1997). As found in the second theme, her horizontal quest has ended, she found what she was looking for and allowed herself to be transformed, while her vertical quest is ascending, developing, as illustrated in the fourth theme. Her vertical quest that continued for 40 years is also what makes this conversion a success. While still admitting to struggling with certain aspects of Buddhism, she regards them with hopefulness. First, about patriarchy in religion, she acknowledges the historical change and envisages a world where she can receive teachings from women masters. As showed in her

interview, Kate is an independent determined woman, with strong feminist views. As stated by previous research, association to religions with a more liberal take on gender relations and women's roles is linked to greater decision-making autonomy than those that generally hold more conservative positions (Agadjanian and Yabiku 2015). Second, about her perceived intolerance and critical view of the world, she works with her meditation and mindfulness practice in order to eradicate it. Both these issues have been lifelong challenges for Kate, and the optimistic and hopeful tone in her voice expressed the hope for change.

The research questions were amply answered by exploring the process of conversion and understanding Kate's feelings while going through it in the first two themes and by analysing the impact of the spiritual transformation on Kate's life and how is she coping with this impact in the last two themes.

As a result of the high level of disclosure by Kate and the depth of analysis permitted by IPA, a rich, profound and comprehensive understanding of the underlying processes, motivations and beliefs of a religious convert was achieved. The emerging themes are painting the image of a powerful life and spiritual transformation, a profound and dynamic lifelong process of integration of concepts and practice, changes and developments supported by previous research. However, this study is probably the first qualitative study to capture the complexity of the religious conversion process in a single unit of analysis. The focus on a single subject "*offers an opportunity to learn a lot about the individual, his or her response to a specific situation, and consider connections between different aspects of the person's account*" (Smith 2004). The participant's story was well represented in the emerged themes which provided a coherent image of her life before and after conversion. This study also reveals how positive religious conversion and spiritual transformation can be, if realised with a proactive, interested and eager mind and if the new religion furthers self-realisation, development, self-exploration, practice and behaviours that support positive change. This transformation is what Carl Rogers (1961) defined as good life: "*but adjectives [defining good life] which seem more generally fitting are adjectives such as enriching, exciting, rewarding, challenging, and meaningful. This process of the good life is not, I am convinced, a life for the faint-fainthearted. It involves the stretching and growing of becoming more and more of one's potentialities. It involves the courage to be. It means launching oneself fully into the stream of life. Yet the deeply exciting thing about human beings is that when the individual is inwardly free, he chooses as the good life this process of becoming*".

These findings extend the current literature on religious conversion with a valuable contribution, especially because qualitative and thematic analysis studies are scarce on this topic. Caution should be used in generalising the findings of this study, because of the use of single case method and also because of the complexities of the history of the participant.

Religious conversion being of such an importance in the current global climate, more qualitative research is needed in this area. In the future, it would be useful to examine qualitatively the perspective of the families of religious converts, for understanding more about the cases of lack of support for the new convert. It would also be interesting to do a qualitative comparative analysis of religious conversion across different adopted religions, to understand what differentiates and connects their members.

#### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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