4 RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES: TOWARDS BETTER PLACES

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is the first of three chapters on nine cases of intentional communities. In each of the chapters, a specific type of community is discussed. Throughout these chapters, the overarching research question will be posed and answered: Which underlying mechanisms can help explain the life courses of rural intentional communities in Northwest Europe? As such, the focus of the following chapters is on three factors which enhance and threaten the continuity of intentional communities, namely the common ideology, organisational structure, and embeddedness in society. The first factor specifically concerns the commitment of the members to a common ideology and community life. This serves as a means to understand why people want to live in an intentional community. The second factor is the organisational structure which provides the framework within which the ideals are realised. Both factors can facilitate and challenge the practice of the ideals in daily life. The third factor is the extent of mutual appeal and rejection between community and outside world. The focus on these three factors is the outcome of findings identified by the literature and data analysis. The analyses of the communities are grounded in the experiences of the respondents, which is amplified through the use of quotes.

In this chapter, I discuss two examples of religious communities, Carmel DCJ in Sittard, the Netherlands, and Goloka Dhama in Abentheuer, Germany (for their locations, see Figure 3.1). Key features of religious communities are a religious ideology, longevity, top-down organisation, and sharing of income. Inter- as well as intra-communal activities are organised. The members of religious communities are often single, and on average aged above 65. Carmel DCJ is a Carmelite monastery, and was chosen as an example of an old religious community as it was founded in 1898. Monasteries have existed from the first century onwards. Although the community itself is not as old as the movement it belongs to, it provides insight into the functioning of a religious community with a long tradition in contemporary society. In February 2005, sixteen of the 35 members of the community and four former members were interviewed in depth. In addition, brief interviews were held with fourteen residents of Sittard. Goloka Dhama is a community within the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), and transpired from the database as an ‘average’ religious community. It was expected to provide an interesting contrast with Carmel DCJ because of its non-Christian spiritual ideology. I visited Goloka Dhama, which was founded in 1995, in April 2005, and conducted in-depth interviews with fourteen of the twenty members. In addition, three outside members, one former member, and nine local residents living in the vicinity of the community, mainly Abentheuer, were interviewed. The objective of this chapter is to answer the research question stated earlier in the introduction, so as to identify the relevant underlying mechanisms at work in religious communities. This chapter is organised by the three key factors facilitating and threatening the continuity of intentional communities as discussed earlier. Each factor, or theme, is examined in turn with respect to Carmel DCJ and Goloka Dhama, highlighting differences...
and similarities. In section 4.2, both communities are introduced, followed by sections on ideology in 4.3, the community structure in 4.4, and processes of social exclusion in 4.5. In the conclusions and discussion (4.6), the results from the cases are viewed in relation to the type of religious communities.

### 4.2 Carmel DCJ and Goloka Dhama

*Carmel DCJ*

Carmel DCJ stands for “Sisters Carmelites of the Divine Heart of Jesus”. Figure 4.1 shows the building where the members are accommodated. Carmel DCJ, located in Sittard, the Netherlands, is the motherhouse of a Catholic congregation of the same name. In Sittard, the community members are known as “the sisters of the Kollenberg”, as the community is located on a hill called the Kollenberg on the fringe of Sittard. The Carmel DCJ congregation is part of the order of Carmelites. Carmelites in general are named after Mount Carmel in Israel, where prophet Elias professed his faith in God, against the common idolatry of Baal (Budnowski 1980). The followers of Elias focused on his loneliness and lived as hermits before setting up contemplative, closed, religious communities (Carmel DCJ 2006). Mother Maria Teresa of Saint Joseph (Anna Maria Tauscher), originally from Brandenburg, Germany, founded the congregation in 1891 and the motherhouse in Sittard in 1898. Her importance in the Catholic Church can be illustrated as she was the first person to be beatified on Dutch territory on 13 May 2006 (De Graaf 2006).

*Figure 4.1: Carmel DCJ, view of nuns’ accommodation from the road*

3 Unless indicate otherwise, the photographs were taken by the author. Permission for taking and publishing them was obtained from all case communities.
The Carmel DCJ congregation combines contemplation with an active apostolate outside the communities (Tauscher 1980). The congregation spread from Germany (Berlin) and the Netherlands to the rest of the world. Figure 4.2 shows the locations of Carmel communities throughout the world. Carmel DCJ’s Catholic philosophy is embedded in Western culture, with its Christian values.

*Figure 4.2: Countries in which Carmel DCJ and ISKCON communities are located*

*Figure 4.3: House for Contemplation Regina Carmeli*

* Entrance to the reception
MAKING A PLACE OF THEIR OWN

The motherhouse is the ‘head office’, as well as the symbolic centre of the movement. In 2005, there were 35 nuns living there, who are referred to as ‘sisters’ in daily life. The sisters who live in the motherhouse are from a variety of countries, such as Germany, the Netherlands, Croatia, the United States and Ethiopia. The apostolate of the nuns has taken various forms over the years. They ran a children’s home from the establishment of the community until 1981, when it was taken over by the state. During the 1970s they had begun a home for the elderly, which was gradually privatised in the mid-1990s. The home is still situated in the building adjoining the monastery. Currently, a House for Contemplation is found on the premises, in a separate part of the building (see Figure 4.3). Many members work in this retreat centre, where children are prepared for their first communion, young people are supported in their search for faith, and retreats are organised for groups and individuals (Carmel DCJ 2006). The community has difficulties with maintaining the apostolate, as many of the nuns are elderly. In 2004, the average age was over seventy.

Goloka Dhama
The second case community, Goloka Dhama, is a Hare Krishna community near Abentheuer, south of Koblenz in Germany, and was founded in 1995. Figure 4.4 shows the entrance gate to the community, with the temple building behind it. Goloka Dhama is part of the ISKCON, which was established by Shrila Prabhupada, a monk who moved from India to New York to spread his beliefs in 1965.

Figure 4.4: Goloka Dhama, main gate with Temple Building in the background

In the 1960s and 70s, the movement became very popular, especially among young people who dropped out of society and were searching for more meaningful lives. They were attracted by the ‘exotic’, Eastern philosophy, and inspired by the different experience of faith that ISKCON provided (Bryant & Ekstrand 2004). This is manifested, for instance, through the variety of deities and other symbols on the altars, the rituals with incense and flowers, and the importance of Indian music in spiritual practice. The songs and prayers remain in the original Sanskrit versions, whereas the main philosophical works have been
translated into other languages. From the United States, the movement spread over the world, as illustrated by Figure 4.2. After the years of growth, ISKCON experienced a difficult period, with scandals about the subordinate position of women, and alleged charges of child abuse (Knott 2004; Muster 2004; Wolf 2004). The movement critically evaluated its organisation in the 1990s to prevent further excesses and to improve its reputation (Goswami 2001).

Goloka Dhama was created after this most critical period in the movement as a whole. Although Goloka Dhama has learned from the above crisis, it has not been able to avert difficult periods itself. In 2005, the community had twenty members, about half of whom were female and half male. They were mostly aged between 25 and 50. In daily life, the members are referred to as ‘devotees’. Most devotees live in families, and have ‘regular’ jobs outside the community. Four priests are fully maintained by the community, because they are engaged in serving Krishna full-time. Apart from the devotees in the community, a number of followers live in surrounding villages. They use the community as a Christian would use a church, and often attend the Sunday celebration at the temple. This is a religious service, followed by a communal meal. The community functions in a locally based network, as well as the global ISKCON.

The current membership of Goloka Dhama is very much in transition. The community is still recovering from an unstable period in the late 1990s, during which an important leader, as well as many of his followers, left the community. Some even renounced Krishna Consciousness. As a result, the number of devotees living on the temple complex declined from more than eighty to around ten. Presently, the number of members is gradually increasing. Relatively many young members from various European countries have moved in, for example from Switzerland, Finland, Croatia and the Serb Republic. These members often see their stay as temporary. Consequently, Goloka Dhama’s continuity remains fragile and uncertain.

4.3 Serving ‘God’ together

In this section, the commitment of the members to Carmel DCJ and Goloka Dhama is discussed. First, the collective identities of members of both communities are described through considering their motivations for joining, perspectives on the common ideology, sense of home, and position in the larger movement. Then, the attention turns to the way the ideology is realised through a discussion about a number of common practices or rituals. This serves to provide insight into how common dedication to a spiritual ideology can enhance the continuity of the communities.

Commitment to Carmel DCJ

When explaining why they had joined Carmel DCJ, most respondents mentioned that they were ‘called’ by God, or the “Heart of Jesus”. Their vocations were often rooted in a Catholic upbringing, and familiarity with nuns in their direct environment, such as in the family, school, or hospital. Until the 1970s, there was a tradition within Catholic families to send one or more siblings into the convent, as a contribution toward salvaging humankind. Foucault (1977) described monasteries as exemplary places of discipline. Through their discipline of mind and body, the nuns contributed to purifying humanity from its sins. Motivations to join often consisted of a combination of religious vocation, family pressure, and wish to work. Married women were not allowed to work outside the household, but
relational sisters were. They ran institutions such as hospitals, schools, orphanages and elderly homes. With the secularisation of society, and acceptance of female participation in the labour market, the interest in joining monasteries gradually decreased. Convents are increasingly located outside mainstream society, and disconnected from everyday mainstream life. Many people perceive the sisters as a traditional, almost archaic phenomenon. As a consequence of these general trends, Carmel DCJ has difficulties in attracting new, young, members, and some members think the motherhouse will literally die out as a result. The declining membership is a problem in the Western world, in contrast to Carmelite communities in Latin America and Africa, which are flourishing.

The most important goal in the lives of members of Carmel DCJ is to serve the Christian God, who constitutes the central meaning of the community (see Liepins 2000b). The sisters acknowledge their lives as only temporary, and are strongly oriented toward the afterlife. As individuals, they seek to be unified with God. Almost all respondents indicated that the common goal was the essential factor in creating a collective or group identity. A shared identity is experienced within the whole Carmelite congregation. The members of Carmel DCJ generally felt at home both in the community where they were living at that moment, and in other communities within the movement as well. Many nuns live and work in various communities of the congregation, for instance as a nurse, child worker, or treasurer of a community. They move to another community whenever their expertise is needed. The universality of their religious beliefs contributes to the existence of a collective identity shared by all members within the movement. A central theme in this shared identity is that the continuity of one particular community is subordinate to the continuity of the congregation. Although membership of the Sittard community was declining, the sisters valued the positive experiences of new communities in countries such as Croatia and Cameroon. They did not doubt the continuation of the congregation:

I think the goals and ideals of the community will persist. If not here, maybe in Latin America, or other countries. The congregation as such will continue. (Carmel DCJ, female member, 40s: 29)

**Commitment to Goloka Dhama**

When commenting on their reasons for joining the ISKCON, many of the devotees of Goloka Dhama indicated that they found Krishna Consciousness in a period during which they were searching for the meaning of life, usually when they were in their twenties. A respondent explained what she experienced when reading some of the central books in Krishna Consciousness:

I was so excited about reading [the books], and immediately when I started, I found the essential philosophy of life, something deeply true. […] I couldn’t argue with the statements in the book. I had to accept it, it was so convincing, all this knowledge. (Goloka Dhama, female member, 40s: 3)

As in Carmel DCJ, ideology forms the essence of the shared meanings ascribed to the community. In some cases, the devotees had been studying different religious philosophies

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4 The interviews were held in Dutch, German, and English. I translated the Dutch and German quotes into English. The number refers to the section of the document in QSR NVivo from which the quote was taken.
before turning to Krishna. They were attracted by aspects of Krishna Consciousness, such as vegetarianism and belief in reincarnation.

Within the Hare Krishna ideology, the idea of reincarnation is central. Devotees believe that they continue to reincarnate upon death, until they maintain a state of spiritual purity. Once they decease in this state, they are united with Krishna forever. This common goal is the essence of Goloka Dhama’s collective identity:

> We’re all here to worship Krishna, otherwise we would not be here. And that’s the centre, the focus of the project. […] Everybody reveres Him […] and everybody is joined together through this common reverence. That’s what keeps the community together. (Goloka Dhama, female member, 30s: 15)

The continuity of the community and the ISKCON is secured through a shared commitment to the practice of worship. The existence of Goloka Dhama is irrelevant in and subordinate to that of the Hare Krishna movement. For instance, the popularity of the movement in Eastern Europe in general, and Russia in particular, is highly valued by all devotees, as they appreciate the expansion of the movement, and the possible contact with kindred spirits. In professing their faith, like-minded fellow worshippers are essential, as is illustrated by this quote:

> So, we can go to any ISKCON Temple in the world. […] One [is among] family. An immense sense of togetherness arises from following common spiritual traditions. (Goloka Dhama, male member, 40s: 13)

The shared ideology forms the basis for the continuity of both Carmel DCJ and Goloka Dhama. Common practices serve to confirm and reinforce this continuity.

**Practising religious life in Carmel DCJ**

The group identity of Carmel DCJ is strengthened through the common spiritual activities embedded in the daily order. A ‘typical’ day for a nun in Carmel DCJ is presented in Table 4.1. The nuns’ daily routine is very structured. As the programme is followed by all members, mutual equality is reinforced. Furthermore, the meticulous planning enables complete focus on the spiritual essence, as members do not have to plan their own time. Community space is organised in such a way as to facilitate the focus on spiritual experience (see Figure 4.5). The nuns’ private accommodation is separated from the rest of the building closed for outsiders, whereas the House for Contemplation is accessible to guests, and emanates a more ‘worldly’ atmosphere. To enhance their personal spiritual experience, the nuns have to remain silent after ‘complete’, the final prayers of the day, until after the spiritual lecture the following morning. During the day, they only discuss functional, work-related issues. Social conversation takes place during the hour of recreation.

According to Foucault (1977), a strict time-table as followed in monastic communities serves to discipline the members, and to produce “docile bodies” (p.135). With respect to discipline and structure, the community can be seen as a total institution, which is “a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (Goffman 1961, p.xiii). Goffman defined religious communities as one of five types of total institutions.
Table 4.1: Daily routine in Carmel DCJ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communal prayer: Laudes, litany</td>
<td>5.50-6.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation</td>
<td>6.20-6.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Mass</td>
<td>7.00-7.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td>7.45-8.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal lecture, followed by prayer in the chapel</td>
<td>8.30-9.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal prayer, sext and conscience study</td>
<td>11.00-11.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal meal</td>
<td>11.30-12.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosary</td>
<td>14.30-15.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal prayer: vespers</td>
<td>17.10-17.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation</td>
<td>17.30-18.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal meal, followed by prayer in the chapel</td>
<td>18.00-19.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation</td>
<td>19.15-20.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal prayer: complete**</td>
<td>20.15-20.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Times and durations are approximate
** Silence until after the communal lecture on the following day
Source: Carmel DCJ (2006)
Collective servitude is further enhanced through wearing a habit, a symbol of austerity and equality. Although similar, the habit is not exactly the same for all sisters. There are some slight differences in their wimples, which mark different phases in membership. These wimples reflect a hierarchy, which is further discussed in the next section on the organisational structure of the community. In general, wearing the habit enhances a communal sense of togetherness. At the same time, through the use of such attire, a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders, or Others, is created (see section 1.7.1). One sister commented:

But we still wear a habit, we’re not in plain clothes, none of us. When I was in [A], […] as we walked on the streets, people would say, “Yes, those are real sisters.” [They asked me,] “Don’t you have other clothes?” I said, “No, we don’t have other clothes.” I don’t want other clothes. I resisted it [when it was proposed in the congregation], because it will lead to jealousy amongst each other. (Carmel DCJ, female member, 70s: 23; emphasis added)

It is acknowledged that in spite of the sisters’ commitment to plainness and equality, they are susceptible to certain undesirable traits such as jealousy. Circumstances are created to minimise the likelihood that such weaknesses will occur, for example through maintaining the habit. Similarly, the strict daily order serves to maintain the focus on spirituality, and to alleviate the tendency of members to be preoccupied with other issues. A focus on a common spiritual goal will facilitate the continuity of the community.

Practising religious life in Goloka Dhama

Krishna, or “the Supreme Personality of Godhead”, is the only God in Krishna Consciousness, but it is believed that He can take many forms (Schweig 2004). For instance, the images on the altar are representations of Krishna (see Figure 4.6). The devotees believe Krishna is truly present in His appearance on the altar. A number of priests are responsible for feeding, bathing and clothing the deities and carrying out the services of worship (Arati) (Table 4.2). The services are public, and can be attended by devotees and others who feel inclined to do so.

Figure 4.6: The altar in Goloka Dhama’s temple
### Table 4.2: Daily routine in Goloka Dhama

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accessible for priests only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waking up the Deities</td>
<td>3.30-3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balya-bhoga: mangala-sweets offering</td>
<td>3.50-4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mangal Arati: worship service</td>
<td>4.15-4.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sila-puja &amp; Vaisnava-homa: dressing of the Deities</td>
<td>4.45-5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation/chanting **</td>
<td>5.00-7.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darshan Arati: greeting of Krishna</td>
<td>7.15-8.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pratar-bhoga: breakfast offering</td>
<td>8.00-8.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture</td>
<td>8.00-8.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhupa Arati: public offering of incense and flowers</td>
<td>8.30-9.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal breakfast</td>
<td>9.00-9.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raja-bhoga: lunch offering</td>
<td>12.30-13.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raja Bhoga Arati: worship service</td>
<td>13.00-13.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sayana-seva: putting the Deities to rest</td>
<td>13.30-14.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal meal</td>
<td>14.00-14.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waking up the Deities</td>
<td>16.00-16.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaikalika-bhoga: afternoon fruit offering</td>
<td>16.15-16.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhupa Arati: worship service</td>
<td>16.30-17.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandhya-bhoga: evening offering</td>
<td>18.30-19.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandhya (Gaura) Arati: worship service</td>
<td>19.00-19.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana-dugdham: milk offering</td>
<td>21.00-21.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sayana-seva: putting the Deities to rest</td>
<td>21.30-21.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Times and durations are approximate
** Personal spiritual obligation
Source: Goloka Dhama (2006)

Caring for the deities is done in private by the priests. The priests’ role is facilitated by the spatial structure of the community, as they literally live closest to Krishna (see Figure 4.7). Thus, their distraction from their duties is minimised. The spiritual obligation for other devotees is to chant for two hours. Attending other services is voluntary, and at the first ceremony of the day at 4.15 a.m., for example, usually only a few members are present. Still, the spiritual practices are perceived to bind the community members together, as was expressed by a respondent:

> The community members are unified through the religious practices we carry out daily, every early morning. Also coming together in the temple room, standing together before the Lord, who is present on the altar. Singing and praying together, that unites us. And the maha-mantra that we chant as well. (Goloka Dhama, female outside member, 50s: 15)

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5 The maha-mantra is the mantra of deliverance:
Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare
‘God’ is praised through chanting the maha-mantra. ‘Krishna’ and ‘Rama’ both refer to God, and ‘Hare’ means energy of God (International Society for Krishna Consciousness 2005). For the chanting, the devotees carry a small bag with a string of beads. The string contains 108 beads, one for each mantra. Sixteen rounds of 108 mantras have to be chanted by the devotees every day, which has a meditative effect. This is often done in private during the early hours of the morning. The maha-mantra can be seen as a ritual which, although individually experienced, symbolises the common devotion to Krishna.

Devotees further emphasise their collective identities through clothing, hairstyle and food (Bryant & Ekstrand 2004). Men who live as monks wear saffron-coloured robes. If they are married, or intend to get married, they wear white. The desired lifestyle of women is less easily recognised from their dress, as they all wear saris. Elderly women mostly wear white, to indicate that they intend to fully concentrate on Krishna. The devotees often wear ‘ordinary’ clothes outside the community. A respondent commented:

Personally, I would never go to town in a sari, or do shopping in a sari. […] I don’t want people to think, she belongs to that odd sect, and so on. (Goloka Dhama, female member, 60s: 16)

The devotees negotiate their identities depending on where they are. Within the community, wearing a sari indicates commitment to Krishna and enhances a sense of togetherness, whereas outside the community it is seen as inappropriate. Her sensitivity about the implications of the sari reflects the awareness that Goloka Dhama perhaps still suffers from the negative image acquired in earlier years.
Making a place of their own

With regard to hairstyle, male members are bald, with the exception of a small tuft of hair on top of their head, which symbolises submission to Krishna and detachment from the material world. Female devotees wear their hair long and braided, as a symbol of chastity. The hairstyles represent a hierarchy between men and women, which is related to the image of women as naturally impure. Lorenz (2004) contended in an academic publication on the position of gurus and women in the Hare Krishna movement that women are perceived to be foolish, ignorant, not as intelligent as men, and tempting men into illicit sex. In contrast to men, women embody spiritual inferiority.

Spirituality is expressed through physical appearance as well as through the consumption and preparation of food. Devotees do not eat meat, fish, and eggs. These are perceived to disturb spiritual awareness. For the same reason, the use of garlic, onions, alcohol and other ‘intoxicants’ is prohibited. Vegetarianism is practised as it is seen as unnecessary to kill animals to feed oneself. Before consuming food, devotees offer it to the deities for blessing. The blessed food is called prasadam, which means mercy, and is supposed to purify mind and heart (International Society for Krishna Consciousness 2005). It can be concluded that the devotees are united through common spiritual practices, which are reinforced through more ‘practical’ habits.

The common goal behind the unifying ideologies and identities of Carmel DCJ and Goloka Dhama is to be united with God. The members’ commitment to this goal is high, as they are willing to submit to practices such as the intensive prayer life, and celibacy. Sosis (2000), labelled such practices “costly rituals” (p.81), as they require a large personal investment and sacrifices by the members. He found that such rituals are vital in securing the group cohesion in and continuity of religious communities.

With regard to the communities’ life courses, it is also interesting to note that they both are part of a worldwide network of communities. As such, they can also be seen as imagined communities as formulated by Benedict Anderson (2000). An imagined community is a community of which not all members know each other in person, but who are bound together through a sense of community in spite of that. Although Anderson applied the concept to a nation, it can also be used in the context of networks of intentional communities. Not all members of the ISKCON, and of the Carmel congregation, know each other, but they share a collective identity, which is based on the unifying ideology within the network. Thus, the specific community in which the members live is ‘just a place’ in a wider network. Its existence is possibly temporary, and inferior to the continuity of the organisation as a whole.

4.4 Hierarchical organisations

As the social structure of a community provides the framework within which the community’s ideals are realised, the following focuses on the ways in which the structures are a source of harmony or conflict for the members, as this influences their propensity to stay or leave.

Organisational structure of Carmel DCJ

While changes have been taking place in the membership of Carmel DCJ, its organisational structure has remained stable. All members take the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Chastity, practised through celibacy, is a characteristic of liminality in intentional communities, as was described in section 1.5.2. A demanding initiation process
Religious communities: towards better places

reinforces the commitment of the members to the community (Pennington 2002). Upon initiation in Carmel DCJ, a member goes through various stages of probation or novitiate, such as that of a postulate, and novice, indicated by a white wimple, whereas the other sisters who have undergone their novitiate wear a black one. In this way, a status of in-betweenness or liminality is indicated and mutually recognised. One respondent commented on this:

Once, after complete [the final prayers and closing of the day], when the strict silence begins until the next day, I felt so sad, so homesick. Then another sister came, and she said come on, we’ll go to sleep, it’s ok, we all went through this. That was it, but you feel that they care about you. (Carmel DCJ, female member, 40s: 14)

The older sister broke the rule of maintaining silence to comfort the young nun, as she recognised her problems as part of the liminal phase of her membership. Thus, liminality serves to justify a more flexible approach in an otherwise very disciplined community. Enjoying a somewhat protected position can help new members to manage the difficult first period of living in the convent.

While the members are committed to equal ideals, and have taken equal vows, the structure of the community is hierarchical. Such an authoritarian leadership structure can be a successful way of leading a group (see Brown 1988; Pennington 2002). The Sittard community is under the charge of a mother superior, or house mother, with assistance from a secretary and treasurer. It is her task to guide the other sisters in their (spiritual) lives and work:

The house mother must maintain an overview, but she must also work together. […] Not by taking people by the hand and leading them, but rather through leaving things to independent individuals, for which the house mother is responsible in the end. (Carmel DCJ, female member, 60s: 14)

The authoritarian structure of leadership is believed to facilitate the functioning of the community in practice. It was experienced as providing a sense of security by many members. Furthermore, as they do not have to organise their own lives, the members can focus exclusively on their goal, to become reunited with God. This is further facilitated by the strict daily order. However, the structure can also be experienced as oppressive and suffocating.

In particular amongst the former members who were interviewed, the oppressive nature of the leadership structure was emphasised. The following ex-sister commented on the difficulties she had with discussing her problems with combining her apostolate responsibilities and spiritual life with those in power:

I remember that the house mother said: where were you, you have to come here when the bells ring. I asked, “Should I leave those small children alone?” [she was then working in the children’s home] […] But they wouldn’t listen, and got really mad with me sometimes. (Carmel DCJ, former member, female, 80s: 27)

Those who were in charge of the community were perceived to ignore the everyday problems the other sisters encountered. Furthermore, they were not willing to address and discuss their own functioning and its consequences with the other sisters. The above respondent described the atmosphere as “no discussion, just obey”. As a result, she became alienated from and critical of the community, and decided to leave. Several members commented on the fact that besides resistance, a lack of self-determination was reinforced through the community organisation, as it is easy to withdraw from responsibilities. Thus,
members eventually behave like ‘sheep’, which are uncritical and passive (Pennington 2002).

An authoritarian structure lacking in open communication was characteristic until the 1980s. The need to change the structure became urgent when quite a few sisters decided to leave the congregation, and hardly new members joined the community. Members of the community began to discuss the structure, and individual initiatives and opinions were increasingly respected and valued. In addition, the conflicts between work and spiritual duties gradually became negotiable. Sisters are still required to work hard, but their individual responsibilities are held in greater consideration. A member commented:

I had to work so hard when I was with the children, it cost me a lot of energy and strength. […] Now I can go to bed earlier, and get up later than the others, because I need it. I think you must care about your health. I did not notice it back then, and it wasn’t possible, you were with the children day and night. (Carmel DCJ, female member, 70s: 11)

The experiences in Carmel DCJ illustrate that when those in power disregard problems in the lives of the community members, feelings of frustration and displacement arise, in spite of shared beliefs in the spiritual ideology. Carmel DCJ seems to have struck a better equilibrium in the combination of a hierarchical structure and openness to the needs of individual members, which enhances the continuity of the community.

Organisational structure of Goloka Dhama

Three groups of devotees can be distinguished within Goloka Dhama: (1) priests, (2) other members living in the community, and (3) outside members. Most of the priests live in the Temple Building, and three female priests reside in part of the House on the Stream (Figure 4.8). The priests work in the temple, and carry out the religious services for Krishna. Some of them have part-time jobs outside the community, to finance extra, personal expenses, such as studies or travel.

Figure 4.8: House on the Stream on the grounds of Goloka Dhama
Second, other members buy or rent a place in the Guesthouse (Figure 4.9), or the House on the Stream and work outside the community. They participate in some of the services and help maintain the community, for example through gardening. Third, outside members are devotees who live in neighbouring villages, and worship in the temple. When looking at the devotees in relation to where they live, it is interesting to observe that those who are in spiritual respect closest to Krishna, i.e. the priests, live closest to His presence in the Temple Building (see Figure 4.7). This minimises potential distraction from the services, and it is an honour to live closest to Krishna.

Figure 4.9: Guesthouse in Goloka Dhama

Originally, only priests lived in Goloka Dhama. Then, the community was organised in a hierarchical structure, and governed by one authoritarian, spiritual leader. He was very active in establishing the community and binding people to him. One respondent described this period:

He was a very dynamic and authoritarian person. He started the whole thing here, brought an amazing number of people into the community. […] [X] was a kind of Jesus figure, he was incredibly charismatic. (Goloka Dhama, male member, 40s: 4)

During his leadership, the community consisted of a large number of devotees, of whom a high degree of commitment was required. Everybody attended the services, practised celibacy, and sold books to generate an income. However, in 1998, the same spiritual leader suffered a mental breakdown, and resigned from the movement. Many devotees who had seen their spiritual leader renounce Krishna Consciousness began to question their identity as devotees. They felt betrayed and insecure about their faith, and many gave up celibacy, married, and moved out of the community. Not all of them renounced Krishna Consciousness, but they refrained from involvement in the community. Thus, the group of outside devotees developed. The membership of the community quickly declined from about eighty to around ten, and the practice of attending the services and selling books was abandoned.
Goloka Dhama is still recovering from the crisis period, and it is in a phase of liminality, between breakdown and desired stability. A description of this stage serves to illustrate the process of stabilisation after disruptive events. Those members who stayed had to learn how to deal with their newly and involuntarily gained ‘freedom’, and reassess their identities as devotees. During the first period, the few remaining devotees felt pressured because they were too small in number and they had to carry out all required services in the temple, which demanded a lot of dedication and energy to keep the place going, until new members began to join gradually.

In an attempt to create a new leadership structure, a temple board consisting of three people was installed. However, it soon fell apart. One member passed away, and the other two were too hesitant in taking decisions. Subsequently, the responsibilities in the community were divided into departments, such as the deity (responsible for the temple), kitchen, and garden departments. At the time of the study, in April 2005, a working group of eight members was refining this structure. They were driven together by their common perception of the need to find somebody to coordinate daily life at the temple complex, for example the division of work. One respondent indicated the need for this by giving an example:

Three weeks ago we celebrated the biggest feast in our tradition, and there was nobody here. […] The whole temple was empty because everybody had left to different temples [for example in Croatia] to celebrate. Nobody had organised a service, or a speaker, nobody had organised a party, nobody had done the shopping, so I thought, now what? (Goloka Dhama, female member, 30s: 11)

Through appointing a coordinator for temple activities as leader of the working group, situations like the above could be avoided. However, the group has not yet agreed to realise this through democracy or a hierarchical structure. It is Goloka Dhama’s challenge to create a system in which devotees are committed to building up the community, and to ensuring its future. What the community has regained already is the consciousness that the shared spiritual values of the ISKCON are independent of a human leadership figure.

In conclusion, the organisational structures of both communities proved to be a significant influence on their life courses. Negotiating these structures to provide an environment that matches the everyday needs of its members is necessary in order to create stability and secure continuity.

4.5 Position in society

Religious communities are held together by a common focus on spiritual life, which results in a strong inward orientation. At the same time, aspects of the outside world may be of interest. For religious communities, this attraction often lies in the possibility to convert outsiders to the community’s ideology. In this section, the balance between excluding outsiders, and susceptibility to outside influences are discussed and related to the continuity of the communities.

Carmel DCJ’s relations with the outside world

Carmel DCJ is first and foremost a place of contemplation. The members live in close personal contact with God, which they can realise best in quiet surroundings. Outsiders are excluded from the nuns’ spaces, and the monastery functions as a closed space, or total
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institution in that respect (Burns 1992). The nuns attempted to contribute to a better world through prayer:

My role is to take what happens in the world into my prayers. […] I have faith, and I trust that’s a different way of being connected with people, with the world. It’s my duty to pray for people, when I know that in Germany, or somewhere in the world, something has happened. (Carmel DCJ, female member, 30s: 12)

Carmel DCJ forms part of the shared Christian heritage of Western Europe, and people from Sittard acknowledge the value of the community as a place for reflection. However, with the ongoing secularisation of society, the community has increasingly become out of place. Local residents remembered the nuns being more active and visible in society when they were still running the homes for children and elderly people. Based on this, it seems that the nuns are remembered for their community service, rather than their religious commitment. Through the changes in apostolate, the community became more inward-oriented:

We don’t have much apostolate here, we don’t go out much, but rather people come to us. Currently we have various groups, prayer groups, for whom we provide the opportunity. (Carmel DCJ, female member, 40s: 24)

A particular focus of the retreat centre is on the religious experiences of children and teenagers. Especially successful is the catechism for teenagers called Life Teen, which originates from the United States. Seventy young people now participate in the programme. A sister described the activities:

The main part is the Holy Mass, followed by one and a half hours of catechism, presented in such a way that they enjoy it. It’s a lot of work, because we decorate the room according to a theme, so it becomes a castle, or a desert. […] I’m in contact with them mostly through the Internet, through MSN [Messenger]. They told me, sister you have to subscribe to MSN, and now they come and have a chat […], it works quite nicely. (Carmel DCJ, female member, 40s: 19)

The sister tried to understand the experiences of the teenagers through a special catechism, and chatting with them on MSN Messenger. In this way, the Carmel DCJ community is becoming less archaic and more a part of the global community. Another example of this is the extensive media coverage of the beatification of Anna Maria Tauscher in May 2006, for example in national newspapers, and on the national news. However, these remain exceptions, and the main purpose of the community is to maintain the spiritual focus. To achieve this, there are rules regarding the extent of permitted contact with outsiders. The nuns can socialise with outsiders only in the context of their apostolic activities, and are not supposed to develop social contacts. Through such exclusionary practices, the nature of Carmel DCJ as a place isolated from society is enhanced.

At the same time, the community is open to exchange and contacts within the Carmelite congregation. There is a high degree of mobility between the communities, and in Carmel DCJ, sisters of various nationalities live together. The close network of Carmelite communities forms the main life world and frame of reference for the members. In Figure 4.10, the relations of Carmel DCJ’s members are depicted. Their strong ties within the community, and with other Carmelite communities, are indicated, as well as their limited contacts outside the movement.
ISKCON temples are based on ideas that are not rooted in Western culture. Devotees are willing to explain their beliefs to outsiders, and also attempt to convert them. Conversion is grounded in the movement’s philosophy:

To assume the compassion of the soul, chanting the holy name, and dedicating oneself [to Krishna] as central, and to convince others of doing the same, that is the most important element in the ideology. (Goloka Dhama, female member, 30s: 24)

However, Goloka Dhama’s remote location makes it difficult to follow missionary traditions, such as going out in the streets while chanting the maha-mantra, distributing prasadam, and selling books. Such activities are more associated with urban ISKCON temples. The devotees recognise this, and prefer to see Goloka Dhama as a spiritual centre, where devotees can live contemplative lives. This is facilitated by its rural location, which functions as a barrier to outside influences. A member described the rural, mountainous location in terms of providing shelter:

[The community] lies behind a mountain, it’s sheltered. I have the feeling that the community developed here because of that. It’s very much protected, for instance from city influences, but also in case of war, or whenever, it will always be a bit sheltered. (Goloka Dhama, female member, 30s: 24)
Rurality is constructed as peaceful, quiet, natural, and protected, which facilitates Goloka Dhama’s exclusion. However, the community does not intend to be isolated from society, and has attempted to interest outsiders in its philosophy:

We want people to come here and experience us, we want to present people our goals, our lifestyle. […] We want to come closer to people and offer them an alternative for their own lives, because that’s what people are looking for nowadays. […] We have other communities in Germany, like the Veden Akademie [Vedic Academy]. [They give] seminars to people, who are looking for roots of civilisation, roots of knowledge, astrology, a healthy lifestyle, all in connection with nature. […] These people don’t have to live in a temple, but rather accept and understand some part of philosophy and apply that in their daily lives. (Goloka Dhama, female member, 40s: 22)

As the community functions as a place of inclusion for insiders rather than exclusion for outsiders, it cannot be seen as a closed place. Goloka Dhama’s members recognise that they are an ‘exotic’ phenomenon in Western societies in general, and in their rural environment in particular, and are actively committed to being accepted. From the time of the community’s establishment, the devotees have been open towards the local population about their lifestyle. A respondent described the strategy of the devotees:

The first inhabitants immediately approached the municipality, and said we’re going to live here, and we’d like to introduce ourselves to you. […] That was a good initiative. They introduced their community, their beliefs, how they are financed. (Goloka Dhama, male local resident, 50s: 5&7)

Initially, the local residents were afraid that the ‘Haris’, as they call the devotees, would attempt to convert them. Although this was at that time “for good reasons” according to one devotee, it was soon agreed that the devotees would not undertake activities to convert others. The current relationship with the local population is based on good neighbourliness. The devotees participate in local community life, for example, through sending their children to the local kindergarten. Furthermore, they are integrated into the local community through work. An example of a company run by devotees who live in Abentheuer is Govinda Versand, an internet shop for ayurvedic and natural products (see Govinda Natur GmBH 2006). Both groups respect each other’s norms and values, which can be illustrated through two quotes from a local resident and a devotee:

I think it’s important […] to be confronted with other ways of thinking. That enables you to realise that our vision of the world is not the only one, and to see that things can be run differently. (Goloka Dhama, female local resident, 40s: 9)

I have to say, most of the people here are very tolerant and open. They just observe whether somebody is sincere and honest. They are not prejudiced, which is what I’ve often experienced in cities. (Goloka Dhama, female member, 30s: 16)

Goloka Dhama has acquired a stable position in its environment, and its continued existence is not likely to be threatened by the local population. Other ISKCON communities are an important source of contact with like-minded individuals for Goloka Dhama. Devotees are encouraged to live in different communities, and can exchange ideas and experiences. The network of communities provides stability to the individual communities, and the movement as a whole. The functioning of Goloka Dhama in its local and global networks is presented in Figure 4.11.
Goloka Dhama and Carmel DCJ demonstrate different positions of religious communities in society. It is necessary to maintain a careful balance between inclusion and exclusion, which differs for every community.

Figure 4.11: Goloka Dhama’s relations within and outside the community

4.6 Conclusions and discussion

Religion is often practised on a scale larger than that of a community, for example in networks of communities. Members of religious communities believe in the permanence of their ideologies, and they are prepared to make sacrifices and commit to costly rituals because of that. Through practising the religious philosophies, the members contribute to their continuity. The purpose of the communities is to improve the world through spiritual practice, while the goal of each individual is to become united with ‘God’. In the end, the continued existence of individual communities, and individual success, are subordinate the continuity of the movement and its philosophy. Spiritual values are the central element, and
not the leadership structure of the community, as became especially clear from the experiences of Goloka Dhama. Thus, the most important conclusion of this chapter in relation to the research question is that life courses of individual religious communities are essentially irrelevant. How this can work out in different ways was demonstrated through the sequence of events experienced by both case communities.

Carmel DCJ shares many of the most characteristic features of religious communities. Its members are single and often elderly. Community life is centred around spiritual services, in which all members participate. Daily life is organised through a hierarchical structure, which provides a secluded environment in which all members know their responsibilities. Although its ideology forms an integrated part of Western culture, Carmel DCJ stands largely apart from its surroundings and society. Besides contacts with nuns from other communities, the nuns’ contacts are limited to people who visit the community, in particular the retreat centre. Through this closed system, they maintain the degree of exclusion they desire. Carmel DCJ functions as a total institution with its closed nature, and the regulated and compulsory nature of the daily activities.

Goloka Dhama is not as ‘extreme’ in its practices as Carmel DCJ. In Goloka Dhama, various degrees of commitment are required from various members. The priests can perhaps be compared with the nuns in Carmel DCJ, as they live in celibacy, have no or little private income and participate in all religious services. Most of the other and outside members live ‘normal’ lives, guided by Krishna Consciousness. Converting others to Krishna Consciousness is an essential element of the community’s ideology, and in that respect, the community differs from the predominantly contemplative Carmelite order. After the founding spiritual leader left the movement in 1998, the community collapsed, and it is still in a state of recovery. Goloka Dhama can be seen to be more embedded in the local area. Devotees live and work there, and are on neighbourly terms with local residents.

Returning to the research question, the main mechanism underlying the continuity of religious communities is the shared faith in a common religious ideology which is embedded in a wider network. A common religious ideology is the most important determinant of the collective identities of religious communities. A key strength of religious communities is that their members are convinced that their religion will continue to exist forever, which renders continuity of their individual community subordinate to the continuity of the movement as a whole. Thus, these can be seen as places of liminality. The members believe that the general ideas and values will continue, and trust that ‘God’ will ensure this. The communities are also liminal places in their members’ individual lives, as they believe in their eventual transition into an eternal afterlife. ‘Worldly’ problems, such as with authoritarian leadership structures, are recognised and solved where possible, but are irrelevant for the members’ ultimate goal. Members of religious communities are in a stage of liminality, a transitional phase in their journey towards an eternal, better place.