

Elementary Forms of Religious Life in Animal Rights Activism

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Abstract

Many scholars have noted that secular belief systems, despite lack of a spiritual base, can possess qualities and display features similar to religion. The most well-known and forceful formulation of this is, arguably, Durkheim's claim that elementary forms of religious life pervade collective life in all societies. This article suggests that animal rights activism can fruitfully be analyzed as an instance of "secular religion". Drawing on Durkheim and based on a study of animal rights activists in Sweden, the article identifies a number of elementary forms and experiences of religious life in animal rights activism. These include overwhelming conversion experiences, a division of the world into sacred and profane, concern about protecting the sacred, commitment to spreading the message and living out one's faith, the feeling that suffering and guilt have meaning, and the constitutive role of common symbols and rituals. The article argues that it is in the light of the activist group as a moral community formed around a sacred ideal that these religious elements are best understood. At the same time, the animal rights activists challenge established boundaries between sacred and profane, when dismantling the symbolic boundary between humans and animals.

Keywords: Animal rights, activism, Durkheim, secular religion, sacred, social movement, Yinger

Introduction

It is well known that many social movement activists burn for their cause. The convictions and ideals on which their activism is based are invested with strong moral and affective force, which both fuels their public actions and guides them in their everyday lives (e.g. Jacobsson & Lindblom 2012, Pallotta 2005). Rarely is this more evident than in the case of animal rights activists; conversion to an animal rights universe of meaning has huge implications for the public as well as the private dimensions of a person's life. Moreover, few contemporary movements challenge dominant value and norm systems in such a fundamental way.

Historically, other social movements have pursued radically new ideals, for instance the extension of full human rights to new categories of people, such as women, racial or sexual minorities. However, the animal rights movement challenges us to extend our moral concern and obligation to encompass a new category of beings, namely animals. By conceiving of animals as sentient beings, as individuals with intrinsic value and rights, by viewing meat consumption as murder and modern insemination practices as institutionalized rape, and by drawing parallels between industrial meat production and the Holocaust, they fundamentally challenge dominant social practices and moral codes. Being themselves a product of cultural modernization and reflexivity, where more and more aspects of human life become open to reflection, questioning and choice, the animal rights activists thus contribute to further moral reflexivity.

I conceive of social movement activists as united by a commitment to distinct moral ideals, and can accordingly be conceptualized as pursuers of moral ideals (see also Jacobsson & Lindblom 2012). Activist groups are as much moral as social communities (e.g. Peterson 2001), as the shared moral ideals that translate into behavioral codes of imperative force are basis for their community. Following Durkheim (1912/2001), I argue that these collective ideals are conferred a sacred status by those committed to their defense. This is why I suggest that it is useful to draw parallels to a religious universe of meaning and to religious experience and practice, in order to understand the nature of commitment and activist experience as well as the consequences for the activists' everyday life and social relationships. Thus, the article suggests that animal rights activism can fruitfully be analyzed as an instance of "secular religion" (cf. Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000; Lowe 2001). The aim of the article is to empirically identify and theoretically understand these religious qualities in animal rights activism as well as to explore their significance for the identities and social relationships of the activists.¹ More generally, the article aims to illustrate the usefulness of a "sociology of religion" perspective for understanding social movement activism even in a secularized society.

It has been noted by many scholars that secular belief systems can possess qualities and display features similar to religion without having a spiritual base or

belief in a transcendent reality. For instance, Simmel stated, “I do not believe that the religious feelings and impulses manifest themselves in religion only” (Simmel quoted in Yinger 1970: 86). Various conceptualizations have been suggested for religious expressions in non-traditional forms of religion, such as secular religion (e.g. Yinger 1970), functional religion (Yinger 1970), quasi-religion (e.g. Edwards 1973; Yinger 1970), implicit religion (e.g. Bailey 1997), invisible religion (Luckman 1967) and civil religion (e.g. Bellah 1967). The most well-known and forceful statement of the persistence of religious elements and forms even in modern, secularized societies is, however, that of Émile Durkheim (2001). Durkheim contended that certain elementary forms of religious life pervade collective life in all societies. He pointed to a basic division of the world into the sacred and the profane, the former being the shared sacrosanct ideals that unite a group, the symbols that represent it, and the collective rites that strengthen group allegiance, and generate the capacity to act in unison.

Empirical illustration of secular religion is provided based on an interview-study of animal rights activists in Sweden. The activists interviewed for this research all identify themselves as animal-*rights* activists in contrast to animal-*welfare* activists. Animal-welfarism is a reformist position, pleading for humane treatment of animals and focusing on improving animal protection. Animal-rights activism more fundamentally challenges humans’ oppression of animals and their claims of superiority. Being an animal-rights activist often entails embracing a vegan lifestyle. Thus, the article captures the mindset of the more radical branch of the broader animal rights movement.

I proceed by introducing the key ideas of Durkheim’s sociology of religion, which are useful for understanding the life worlds, identities and practices of animal rights activists. I also briefly discuss some alternative conceptualizations of non-traditional forms of religion, and argue for my own conceptual understanding and definition in this article, namely that of “secular religion”, for which I am indebted to Durkheim. I then locate my study in relation to previous research. Thereafter, I present my data, methods and finally the findings of an empirical study of animal rights activists in Sweden, their life worlds and experiences.

Animal Rights Activism as Secular Religion: A Theoretical Perspective

According to Durkheim, there are three fundamental elements to every religion: sacred things, a set of beliefs and practices, and the existence of a moral community. He defined religion as

a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church (Durkheim 1917/2001: 46).

Sacred things, in his understanding, “are simply collective ideals that have fixed themselves on material objects” (1914/1973: 159). Thus, the thing symbolizes the ideal. To Durkheim, the division of the world into sacred and profane is universal.² He argued that all societies have moral ideals which are held to be sacred and inviolable, the transgression of which leads to reprisal and sanctions – whether legal or social. For Durkheim, thus, modern society is not a completely desacralized world. However, the taboos and collective imperatives enclosing the sacred are no longer of the same absolute character; with the development of modern science and democracy they become more open to reflection and critique (Durkheim 2002: 52f)

In the modern, secularized world, the sacred is most clearly expressed in the sacrosanct status that is granted to the individual, and Durkheim saw individualism as an expression of a modern faith and cult. I suggest that what the animal rights activists do is expand this individualism to encompass animal individuals as well. Animal rights activists challenge us to take account not only of humans, but to perceive animal-beings as inviolable, entitled to dignity and rights.

Durkheim (2001) defined a moral community, or church, as a group of people with shared views of the sacred world and its relation to the profane, and with shared views of how these representations are to be translated into common practice. I submit that the animal rights activist group can be understood as such a community; its members share a worldview or cosmology where animals are seen as individuals, as having intrinsic value. Animals are seen as fellow-beings capable of suffering and, equally important, as beings with a soul. The notion of soul was for Durkheim an important characteristic of religion, as there is no religion “in which we do not find a whole system of collective representations related to the soul” (2001: 183). As beings in possession of a soul, animals are entitled to dignity and respect, and for this reason, the activists strongly object to the instrumental use of animals for human ends.

This worldview translates into a coherent code of conduct, namely consistent veganism. The inviolability of the human body has become sacred, a symbol of human rights and dignity.

The animal rights activists show a similar concern for the bodily integrity of animals. They see the ingestion of animal flesh as both immoral and disgusting (Hansson & Jacobsson 2014). As will be further elucidated below, recruitment into animal rights activism can be understood as a conversion to such a worldview and mindset.

The role of rituals was also key in Durkheim’s sociology of religion. Rituals are standardized and therefore predictable patterns of behavior with a symbolic and expressive dimension to them. For Durkheim, participation in rituals generates collective feelings among the participants, notably *collective effervescence*, a heightened sense of awareness and aliveness without which activists would not be able to transcend individual self-interest and self-limitations. Collective efferves-

cence is important for collective action because of its transformative potential; for a moment the ritual participants feel that all is possible. This impersonal, extra-individual force transports the individuals into another, ideal realm, lifts them up and outside of themselves, and makes them feel as if they are in contact with an extraordinary energy. However, since collective effervescence is a temporary feeling – often followed by disillusionment and poor self-confidence in the absence of the group rituals must be repeated. Durkheim’s sociology of religion emphasizes the group-related functions of religious practice; that is, the social needs that rituals fill, most importantly by strengthening in-group solidarity and reaffirming commitment to the common ideal.

Drawing on Durkheim, sociologist of religion Milton Yinger (1970) developed the notion of “functional religion”. In contrast to substantive theories of religion, which focus on what religion *is* (its content), functional theories are interested in what religion *does* (Yinger 1970: 4). In the words of Yinger (1970: 11), “If we take the functional approach to the definition of religion, it is not the nature of the *belief*, but the nature of *believing* that requires our study”. This is consistent with my present interest in what a conversion into an animal rights universe of meaning *does* to the individual and her social relationships – the implications of such a faith, as well as its expressions, forms, and ways in which it is practiced.

Yinger defined religion as:

a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with [the] ultimate problems of human life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human associations. The quality of being religious, seen from the individual point of view, implies two things: first, a belief that evil, pain, bewilderment, and injustice are fundamental facts of existence; and second, a set of practices and related sanctified beliefs that express a conviction that man can ultimately be saved from those facts (1970: 7).

For Yinger, this did not necessarily imply a belief in a transcendent reality, as also inner-worldly matters can be of ultimate concern: “Injustice is bearable only if this world is written off as a temporary and unimportant vale of tears; it becomes an ultimate concern to those who are concerned only with this existence” (Yinger 1970: 533, cf. Tillich 1957).³ Thus, non-theistic belief systems can also be called religions. According to Yinger, even if people reject that which they identify as religion:

It is likely, however, that such individuals, having left some traditional religion, will nevertheless affirm their faith in some “over-beliefs”, will get emotional support from various symbols, acts, and ceremonies (worship), and will join with others in groups that seek to sustain and realize shared beliefs (1970: 11).

In the stress on symbols, ceremonies and emotions, the influence of Durkheim is marked.

Edward Bailey (e.g. 1997) has suggested the term “implicit religion”, which, he claims, can be expressed both in secularism and organized religion. Bailey pre-

fers this concept “because it keeps its options open with regard to its referent’s structural and historical origins, its social and cultural location, its mode of religiosity, and its relationship with other forms of religion” (1997: 41). He identified three defining characteristics of implicit religion: “commitment”, “an integrated focus” of one’s life and “intensive concerns with external effects” (Bailey 1997: 8f). All these characteristics, as we will see, feature prominently in the lives of the animal rights activists.

In synthesis, I use the concept of *secular religion* to denote a set of ideas and accompanying practices displaying the following features/characteristics. First, there is a distinct universe of meaning based on a division of the world into sacred and profane. Second, there is a moral community defined by its adherence to a specific sacred ideal and commitment to its defense. This ideal represents a non-theist system of beliefs and an inner-worldly utopia which nonetheless becomes an ultimate concern for its community of believers.

Finally, the group displays elementary forms of religious life in terms of distinct beliefs, experiences, and practices (such as rituals). According to this concept of secular religion (and in contrast to Bailey and Yinger, for instance), the sacred component of the belief system is still key. It is understood in a Durkheimian sense as a moral ideal, attaching intrinsic value to something, and thus as inviolable and in need of protection from contamination by the profane. Consequently, it is a specific moral ideal that forms the basis for group identification and community. Thus, a secular religion, just like a traditional religion, builds on a clear boundary between believers and non-believers, between those committed to the ideal and others.⁴ Moreover, as in the case of traditional religion, a secular religion is also based on *dedication* to the sacred ideal, which involves not only a cognitive awareness and intellectual motivation but also an equal amount of emotional engagement.

My contention is that animal rights activism contains/displays these elementary forms of religious life and can be seen as an instance of secular religion. It is the sacredness of the ideal (of animals’ intrinsic value) that sets the activists on fire, and it is in the light of this sacred ideal that their fervor, zeal and sometimes uncompromising attitudes should be understood. The moral ideal translates into an imperative code of conduct and manner. Even if the belief system (or faith) is also codified in creeds, such as the universal declaration of animal rights, and in foundational texts, such as texts by moral philosophers Tom Regan, Peter Singer, and Gary Francione, even more important here are the convictions inscribed in the hearts and the souls.

Relation to Previous Research

Research on animal rights activists in the US has found that animal rights activists tend to be less religious in the traditional sense than the average person; the group

numbers a larger than average proportion of agnostics or atheists (e.g. Galvin & Herzog 1992, Jamison & Lunch 1992, Jasper & Poulsen 1995, Richards quoted in Jamison, Wenk, Parker 2000). Nevertheless, as will be illustrated empirically below, the movement displays many of the elementary practices and experiences of religious life.

Two previous studies have explicitly studied animal rights activism in religious terms (Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000; Lowe 2001), while a number of other studies have drawn parallels to religion without developing this further (e.g. Herzog 1993; McDonald 2000; Jacobsson & Lindblom 2012), or have pointed to experiences which can be interpreted in such terms. Jamison, Wenk and Parker (2000) drew on Yinger (without mentioning Durkheim), arguing that all the critical components of functional religion are to be found in the case of animal rights activism, including intense conversion experiences, newfound communities of meaning, normative creeds, distinct codes of behavior and cult formation. The authors suggested that understanding animal rights activism as functional religion helps us understand the intensity of activist commitment.

Lowe (2001) analyzed animal rights activism as a “quasi-religious phenomena”, in view of the activists’ moral orientation and outrage, their concern with purity and their common micro-interactions and rituals. Lowe also argues that texts produced by philosophers, such as Singer and Regan, have achieved a quasi-sacred status in the movement. The respondents in my study, however, are far more ambivalent about the importance of the philosophers. I find it more appropriate to conceive, not of texts or the movement as sacred objects (cf. Lowe 2001), but of animals as symbols of a sacred ideal. Nevertheless, Lowe acknowledges the fundamentally moral nature of the animal rights movement (drawing, here, on Weber and the notion of value-rational motives, rather than on Durkheim).

I differ from previous authors in emphasizing that it is in the light of the activist group as a moral community formed around a sacred ideal that the religious elements can be best understood. When Jamison, Wenk and Parker (2000: 306) ask, “What are the sources of this intensity and commitment?”, my reply is “the sacred”. Without a theoretical understanding of the sacred, the religious features remain incomprehensible and exotic. The division between sacred and profane is key here, but also the fact that the activists’ representation of the sacred clashes with that of mainstream society. This is why many people react so strongly against the views of animal rights activists or depict them as extreme or even bizarre (which is not uncommon in the mass media). By dismantling the symbolic boundary between humans and animals (Cherry 2010), the activists challenge established boundaries between sacred and profane.

Data and Method

Durkheim's preferred method was observation. However, as will be illustrated in this article, interviews can also capture the forms and experiences of religious life. Another of the classics, William James's seminal work *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902/2002), has served as a methodological source of inspiration for this study. In order to capture the religious mind, James chose to study the most religious persons – not because these alone express a religious worldview, but because they do it most explicitly. Likewise, I chose to study persons who are passionate about their cause – not the half-hearted individuals who might be paying but passive members of an animal-welfare organization – because secular sacralism is more visible there. Rather than trying to achieve a sample that would be representative of all branches of the broader movement, including both animal rights and animal welfare activists, the study focuses on the most committed, zealous activists, those who explicitly define themselves as animal rights activists. My selection criteria were (1) that study participants were vegans and (2) that they were self-defined animal rights activists. Consequently, my findings cannot be generalized to the broader movement; what I have captured is the mindset of committed animal rights activist groups. The interviews have been aimed at capturing the life worlds and experiences of the activists as well as the implications activism has for their everyday lives. The fact that many previous studies, mainly from the US (Herzog 1993; McDonald 2000, Pallotta 2005 to name but a few), point in a similar direction (even if they have not necessarily conceptualized them in religious terms), shows that these experiences and outlooks are not extreme but rather typical for this category of activists.

This is an intensive study, based on 18 open-ended, in-depth interviews with Swedish animal rights activists, each lasting from one and a half to five hours. The activists belonged to different groups. Ten interviews were conducted in 2004 with activists engaged in Animal Rights Sweden, which is the largest and oldest animal welfare organization in Sweden. Today it seeks to combine animal rights and animal welfare activism. The remaining eight interviews were conducted in 2010 with activists belonging to the Animal Rights Alliance and a local network of animal rights activists in Gothenburg. The Animal Rights Alliance was started in 2005 as a more activist and radical alternative to Animal Rights Sweden. The local Gothenburg group has an approach similar to the Alliance, giving their moral support even to illegal actions. The activists interviewed, however, tended to be members of several different organizations, not limiting their commitment to one group only, and some were more radical than the organization to which they belonged. At least one had carried out Animal Liberation Front actions. In this article, the analysis focuses on the mindset and experiences of the activists. These tend to be shared by all the interviewed activists. I have therefore chosen to treat the informants as one group. The sample includes activists who held key positions

in the respective organization or network at the time of the study. They either held formal leadership positions or functioned as informal leaders. The remainder of the participants was recruited through snowball sampling. Care was taken to secure diversity in terms of age and gender. Eleven women and seven men were interviewed, aged between twenty and sixty, the average age being around thirty. Most of them worked professionally, although some of the younger ones were students and a few were unemployed or on sick-leave. For all of them, the animal rights issue was a priority concern in their lives, while paid work was more a necessity.

Elements of Secular Religion: Empirical Findings

In the following, I will offer an empirical illustration of some key elementary forms of religious life in animal rights activism. Consistent with an approach which is more interested in what religion *does* than what it *is*, focus will be less on beliefs and more on experiences, practices and relationships.

Experiences of Awakening and Conversion

Return to me with all your heart (Joel 2:12)⁵

A marked element of religious life in animal rights activism is indeed the strong experiences of awakening and conversion that activists give witness to, after which they see the world in a new light and feel compelled to act. It is a conversion to a distinct worldview which entails a transformation of the epistemological horizon of the individual (Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000). But even more importantly, it is a *conversion to a moral ideal* and command. Thus, it entails not just beliefs but moral commitments and obligations. It is in this light that we can understand the dramatic and all-encompassing changes in conduct of life that accompany the changes in thinking (see also Herzog 1993, Pallotta 2005), and the imperative to give up one's old life style and live according to new values and norms, such as unwavering adherence to veganism.

Durkheim (1914/1973) pointed to the fundamental dualism of human nature, which Shilling and Mellor (2010) conceptualize as *homo duplex*. As human beings we are internally divided between egoistic dispositions and moral dispositions, the latter following from our attachment to a social group. The conversion to the animal rights ideal entails a 'push' towards the moral side of one's character, and giving up one's old life thus entails trying to suppress the egoistic dispositions for the sake of the cause.

The fact that the conversion narratives are recurrent in the interview material as well as documented in previous research indicates that conversion is also social – an individual experience in a shared form. The activists interviewed testify to

have experienced a form of revelation – akin to that of a traditional religious revival – whereby their eyes were opened and they saw the world as it truly is:

I was unenlightened before. Our society is incredibly good at hiding and euphemizing the situation and what is going on. We normalize that we murder and use animals. I was socialized into that [...] I think that I just needed to see, someone needed to show me what reality is like, and when I saw that and opened my eyes to something else and to what reality is like, I felt that “this I cannot support”. It felt self-evident.⁶

Another said, “It was as if all pieces fell into their place and I understood that here I have been going around for 10 years without seeing or understanding anything”. The conversion experience entails moving from an unenlightened state to a new consciousness about the world and one’s place in it, namely as a savior of suffering souls (see also Gaarder 2008).

The informants express something close to amazement at not having seen the connection between animals and food before, though perceiving themselves as being animal-friendly. Suddenly it all appears self-evident. In their conversion narratives there is thus a clear “before and after” (who I was and who I became) (see also McDonald 2000). There is also a sense of surrender – life cannot be the same again. (See also Joas 2000 and James 2002 on self-surrender as fundamental to religious experience). To the activist, the moment of conversion appears to be a point of no return. As one informant put it, “Once you have opened yourself there is no way back”.

To “open oneself” means opening up to the suffering that is constantly around us. The experience of eye-opening is accompanied by a willingness to live with open eyes, with “no blockers on” (McDonald 2000: 11), a commitment to face and confront the suffering that exists. Shapiro (1994) has even characterized animal rights activists as “caring sleuths”, who deliberately seek suffering victims with which to empathize. Empathy and compassion with those who suffer feature frequently in the interview narrations (this is consistent with findings in other studies; e.g. Shapiro 1994; Lowe 2001; Pallotta 2005). Instead of turning off or looking away, the activists deliberately let themselves be affected by the suffering of others.

The awakening thus entails a sensitization (Shapiro 1994) and an awakening of sensibilities (Hansson & Jacobsson 2014), whereby the activists can almost feel the pain of others. “It was a disgusting picture of a monkey with a syringe in its neck. I reacted really strongly and could almost feel the physical pain”. As another one puts it, “once you have opened your eyes it is so bloody painful to see everything around you”.

In the experience of eye-opening and “seeing”, meeting animals’ eyes is key, as is also documented in previous research (see Herzog 1993; Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000; Gaarder 2008). One interviewed activist relates the following experience of watching films picturing animals suffering:

I felt so incredibly bad and it was emotional. There are things that just stay and I can never go back. It was like it was so amazingly profound and I was really sad. And when you see it there with their eyes, these pigs' eyes are totally different from other pigs' eyes. Like pigs going to slaughter. Or living in large [industrial] buildings. I still have those pictures. It is the eyes of some animal.

The eyes are the proverbial window of the soul and thus bring to mind that animals are beings with a soul and therefore entitled to moral consideration and concern. It is in this light we can understand Jamison, Wenk & Parker's (2000: 315) finding that the informants drew a distinction between animals who possess eyes and those who don't. Only the former were seen as subjects of moral concern.

As pointed out by Joas (2000: 5), conversions are basically non-intentional, while resulting in a paradoxical feeling of voluntary commitment and ineluctable force. The typical conversion pattern among the informants of this study is not that of seekers looking for a meaningful cause to dedicate their lives to, but rather of people attesting to a sense of being "hit" by the insight/revelation, like St Paul on his way to Damascus (cf. Regan quoted in Vaughan 2012). The activists can point to specific turning-points when their eyes were opened and their lives transformed. In previous research, these moments have been termed "catalytic experiences" (McDonald 2000) "epiphanic events" (Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000) or "trigger events" (Pallotta 2008). The catalytic events typically entail both an overwhelming emotional experience and a new cognitive understanding, whereby "pieces fall into place". Jasper and Poulsen (1995) talk of "moral shocks" and see moral shocking as one of the main mechanisms of recruitment into animal rights activism, often caused by exposure to horrifying and upsetting pictures of animal suffering. For some of my informants, the confrontation with pictures had been preceded by a sensitization by animal rights arguments or by having developed a pre-disposition to empathy towards animals – for example acquired through childhood experiences of having beloved pets – which might have facilitated receptiveness to moral shock (see also Pallotta 2005).

There are also a few (all male) informants who stress that their conversion was due to philosophical reasoning and that their feelings of compassion were developed later. Nevertheless, in the sample, an awakening caused by seeing films, pictures and other sights is the recurrent pattern of conversion and it was typically an emotionally upsetting experience: It was pictures that made me react emotionally. I was sad, angry, in despair. It tore up a lot within me.

It is well known that converts often become "hardcore", as compared to people who have grown into a belief-system gradually, for instance through their upbringing. It is therefore not surprising, in a sample of subjects who define themselves as animal rights activists and who are all vegans, to find many who have had these conversion experiences.⁷

It is, moreover, worth noting that several of the activists also keep exposing themselves to re-shocking experiences. This can be interpreted as a way of recre-

ating the conversion experiences later in their activist careers (see also Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013, Hansson & Jacobsson 2014). This is a deliberate attempt to unsettle one's "zone of comfort" in order to remain open to the suffering of animal-others:

One has to look at animal rights films [...] sometimes there are new animal rights films and so on. New undercover [films] in fur farms, et cetera and that's what I look at to remind myself of why I'm standing outside for example AstraZeneca in Mölndal and screaming. This is why I do this. Not to forget.

Another says, "When I see those pictures, then the fire is lit and there is no other way to go". Reminding oneself through re-shocking experiences is a way of affirming one's commitment to the sacred ideal.

Dedication and Commitment

Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.
(James 2:17)

Conversion to animal rights activism is transformative; it pervades all aspects of the activists' lives and it entails a totalizing experience, which is why Pallotta speaks of it as "total recruitment" (2005: 12). It is not possible to compartmentalize the animal rights issue from the daily, non-activist life (cf. McDonald 2000). For the interviewees, activism tends to be the first priority of their lives (see also Herzog 1993): "Activism for animals is very much what my life is about", one activist says. He adds that this is what he would like people to remember him for when he is dead. Thus, the conversion means that the activist gets a new and integrated focus in life, which overcomes divisions of experience (cf. Bailey 1997: 8), something that is characteristic of religious experience (Joas 2000: 52; James 2002). Bailey's three defining characteristics of implicit religion: commitment, an integrated focus in one's life and intensive concerns with external effects, are thus very much present here.

Having had their eyes opened, the activists are typically overwhelmed by the suffering around them and being driven by empathy they feel compelled to reduce this suffering (see also Shapiro 1994; Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000). They also feel called upon to go out into the world, give testimony and spread the message, and so save animal-souls. As has also been pointed out by Herzog (1993), there is an evangelical component in their involvement, and activists assume ignorance rather than indifference from the public. Thus, they strongly believe in information-spreading, through leaflet distribution or bookstalls and by talking to and setting examples for others, for instance by demonstrating that there is nothing strange about a vegan diet. Despite the fact that their own experience typically is that of having seen the truth – revelatory knowledge – they are concerned to back up their claims with scientific knowledge claims, such as findings in neuroscience that animals, including fish, are sentient beings capable of feeling pain. Striking in

the animal rights religion is indeed its *combination* of faith and science, a rationalist worldview *and* a secular faith.

The converted activist is typically convinced of the correctness of her beliefs and the justifiability of her cause, showing a combination of idealism and ideological certainty (Galvin & Herzog 1992). As stated by one interviewee, “We know that we are right. One day people will look back and think that we were right”. Another said, “Of course it is very tough to go against all that society is fighting desperately to retain. But it is also so comforting to know that the struggle I pursue is the right one”. The moral certitude leaves little room for compromise and pragmatism (see also Herzog 1993; Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000; Taylor 2004), which has led Jasper & Nelkins (1992) to speak of animal rights activists as being on a moral crusade. As one informant expressed it, “I am uncompromising - no bloody mawkishness here”.

The intensity of commitment, the passion and the zeal of animal rights activists are well documented in previous research (e.g. Jasper & Nelkin 1992; Herzog 1993; Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000; Taylor 2004). I suggest that it is in relation to the burning passion for the sacred that the force of the moral ideal can be understood – a force that occasionally compels the activists to break “earthly” laws. For the activists, the animal rights cause has the status of ultimate concern – it is a religious universe and mindset as much as the ideology they hold. In this light we can understand the dedication to the cause and the willingness to make the sacrifices it exacts. To live the life of an animal rights activist means embarking on “the narrow road”. Small decisions in daily life, which most people don’t even think about, such as whether to take medicines tested on animals or whether to kill vermin or not, become a matter of inner moral deliberations and a cause for remorse (Herzog 1993: 109). Moreover, the activist feels compelled to live out her faith – by taking action. It is through action that commitment is manifested (see also Peterson 2001).

A Meaning in Suffering and Guilt

But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life,
and only a few find it (Matthew 7:4)

Being committed to reduce the suffering of animal-others means that one may have to accept a certain amount suffering oneself. As Yinger has pointed out, for a religious person, surrender and sacrifice can be perceived as beneficial and religious people typically find some meaning in suffering and in “givings up” (Yinger 1970: 7-9). For the interviewed activists, sacrifices for the sake of the cause are perceived as necessary. These may include career opportunities, one’s own comfort, or a traditional family life. “Previously I had some plans for getting children but I am not particularly interested in that any more. If I eventually would want to have children it would certainly be with a vegan.” Another states:

People should not think so much about having a family or devoting their time to possessions. I think it is clear that we who are engaged in Animal Rights Sweden don't care much about such things. We are not as materialistic as society at large [...] I myself have no family and those who are most active are those who don't have children. Of those who usually come to our membership meetings I don't think there is even one who has a child.

Renunciation and sacrifice can be perceived as beneficial because they are signs of commitment to the moral ideal. By contrast, failure to "give up" may be a sign of the fire having died, the loss of the battle against egoistic dispositions.

A distinctive feature of the animal rights movement is the degree to which its members experience feelings of guilt and remorse (see also Groves, 1997; Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000; Shapiro 2004; Pallotta 2005; Gaarder 2008; Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013). Having had their eyes opened, they see suffering all around them and there is no apparent end to this – billions of animals are killed each year and the world's meat consumption is on the rise. The activists experience collective guilt on behalf of humankind, which treats its fellow-beings in such a way, but also personal guilt for not doing enough and for failing to live up to the ideals. The sacred ideal compels; it is imperative to act and failure to do so causes guilt and shame; and vice versa, pride and self-respect require that one acts. Indeed, to act is the only way to get relief from guilt; in contrast to theist belief systems, there is no external source of atonement, no forgiveness or absolution. In such a situation, increased activism becomes a secular penance (Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000: 318f). As one informant put it, "I do this in order to quiet my bad conscience. [...] I feel that I just have to do something, when I know what it [the world] is like". Another said, "Even if it is very hard to see all this, it would be even harder to know that you don't do anything".

To burn for a cause always bears the risk of getting burnt out, something of which several of my informants are acutely aware (see also Pallotta 2005). As one of them related:

I know many who get burnt out and just work out of guilt – guilt, and pressure and force and who can't feel that it is fun [...] Most people can't handle it [the feeling of inadequacy] and I am not saying that I can, but I am working hard at it [...] That is something I am working on right now in a very deliberate way – to not become burnt out.

Nevertheless, while the interviewed activists bear witness to the difficulties entailed in living with guilt and feelings of inadequacy, self-reproach can also gain a positive aura, as it is a sign of commitment to the sacred ideal.

The Moral Community and the Surrounding World

They are not of the world,
just as I am not of the world. (John 17:16)

The capacity to "see" distinguishes the activists from others, and this easily leads to feelings of dissonance and estrangement in relation to the surrounding world

(cf. Pallotta 2005). How can people look upon the world with such different eyes? Where others might just see a bottle of milk, the activist sees a product of institutionalized rape and imagines a calf-child which has been separated from a grieving mother, and where others may enjoy a delicious meal, the activist sees a murder committed. Some informants almost feel like they are living in a parallel universe and, like the Christian pilgrim, they feel like foreigners in this world. The seeming indifference of others to the suffering of animals is incomprehensible to them. “I can’t understand that people can’t see. People are so egoistic”. Another related:

I feel in relation to those who are not vegans that they are fine people, but I cannot disregard that they do not live the way I do. I ask myself, “How come this clever person does not realize such an obvious thing?” It is sad that we cannot fully understand each other.

Moreover, as the animal rights paradigm challenges the worldview of mainstream-society in such a fundamental way, many people are provoked by animal rights activists. Most of the informants report encountering hostility from an unsympathetic environment:

I can be surprised of how mean people can be or how little they care when I meet them in town. When I approach them with a petition they don’t say anything or they make remarks such as “Meat is delicious” or “I want to wear fur”.

There was a meat norm and when I breached it, problems arose. Both my parents and my friends could say “Oh you bloody vegan” and then I felt that I didn’t want to meet people who are not vegans [...] I am not surprised any more when people are unpleasant, sarcastic or make personal attacks. It has been like that ever since I began to be involved in animal rights.

The activists report having to put up with taunts from their social environment daily, and having to defend their eating habits in a way that meat-eaters do not. As it would be useless to be in constant disputes with people around them – “it would be untenable both for me and for others” as one informant put it – the activists feel that they often have to hold back: “You have to compromise all the time and pretend that you don’t care”.

A transformation in thinking and conduct of life as dramatic as that of conversion into animal rights activism inevitably affects personal relationships, and the informants experience alienation in relation to, and sometimes even ostracism from, their previous social networks and families (see also Herzog 1993; Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000; Pallotta 2005). While for some conversion leads to the break-up of old connections, others retain their old friends. Common to all those interviewed, however, is the importance attached to the “new-founded” community, the vegan community, where they can return to regain their spirits and where they feel they can relax and not have to defend their conduct of life but just “be” (see also Pallotta 2005; Gaarder 2008). It is precisely because they are forced to segregate their “different selves”, to some extent “holding back” and “pretending

they don't care" when at, for instance, their workplace, that they urgently need places where they can be their true selves. Thus, the interviewees say that they keep meeting with other vegans "all the time". The activist community is also important for emotional support and reaffirmation of commitment. One interviewee talks of other group-members "sharing the grief", and helping "carry you when you don't have the strength yourself".

The sense of community comes from sharing a commitment to the same moral ideal, and by implication, sharing the same way of life. Adherence to the sacred ideal – and non-adherence – provides a clear-cut boundary between in- and out-group. There is no in-between. This means that for the activists, formal organizational belonging is less important than the group-boundaries arising from commitment to the same ideal. Adherence to the ideal constructs a community of Us in contrast to Them:

Those who are uninformed of the animal rights question and who are not even vegetarians I can regard as "Them." I may feel that those who do not understand a thing are hopeless and thick-headed, but I never say such things even if I feel like that.

Another says that, "Of course there is an Us and Them feeling ... but I try to see them as 'until now blocked'", that is, as persons with the potential to be awakened by the message.

Even so, the commitments and practices separating believers from non-believers create a boundary of purity (see also Lowe 2001), and in-group members are concerned with preserving that purity against contaminations.

Protection of the Sacred

For where your treasure is,
there your heart will be also. (Luke 12:34)

The sacred is worthy of devotion and respect; it bears with it a sense of intrinsic obligation, demanding devotion and enforcing emotional commitment (see also Lowe 2001). This means that the sacred needs to be protected from pollution by the profane; that is, from being taken over by all the mundane matters of everyday life. Sacred ideals, as ultimate concerns, stand in stark contrast to individuals' immediate and utilitarian concerns (Tillich 1957: 1f ; Yinger 1970: 14; cf. Durkheim 1912/2001). It is in this light we should understand the activists' preoccupation with not letting professional life, leisure interests or even a traditional family life outrival the defense of the collective ideal, namely animal rights.

Again, protection of the sacred from contamination by the profane entails a form of boundary-drawing, and all boundary-drawing serves as a symbolic (re)construction of community (cf. Cherry 2010). For instance, meat-eaters within the movements are looked upon with suspicion and even contempt, and animal-welfare activists are criticized for not going far enough in their demands. Thus, collective protection of the sacred ideal readily translates into social control. As Durkheim (2002) reminds us, not only moral ideals but also norms backed up by

sanctions are the building-blocks of the moral order. The interviews reveal that there are social sanctions exerted against apostates, such as petty gossip behind the backs of people who seem to have lost the fire and show up at meetings less frequently, or who have even reverted to meat-consumption. Members of the movement must repeatedly prove their commitment to the ideal through action. They will otherwise be labeled ex-activist and thus apostate (on the policing of dissension, see also Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000, Jacobsson & Lindblom 2012). There is little space for “cooling” down commitment, and anyone who does will lose community bonds.

Moreover, the interviews reveal that, within the activist-group, internal hierarchies tend to arise and actions are assessed according to the sacred ideal and its defense. Sacrifices confer social status. Thus, activists are assigned positions closer to or further from the sphere of the sacred according to their actions (Jacobsson & Lindblom 2012, cf. Lowe 2001 on “moral virtuosos”). “If someone doesn’t do something for a while, that person declines in an informal hierarchy [...] you have to be active to retain your position”, one of them explained. The activists also compare their actions to those of the others:

I compare myself to others, [to see] whether I do more or less than they do. Maybe this preoccupies me more than other people because right now I’m busy trying to get more involved. If I haven’t done anything for a while, I then have more to live up to.

Another purity concern is the internal debate within the movement about whether certain arguments are valid or not. Arguments referring to environment or health benefits from giving up meat-consumption tend to have less validity among animal rights activists – although they would probably find wide resonance in society. Rather, arguments about the intrinsic rights of animals are preferred. Again, the “sacred” with its intrinsic value is to be protected from the instrumental values, which belong to the sphere of “the profane”.

Mary Douglas (1991/1966) has forcefully argued that what is “pure” and what is “dangerous” depends on symbolic classification and boundary-drawing. The animal rights activists feel the same repulsion at the thought of ingesting pork or chicken as most Europeans may feel at the idea of eating cats or rats. The animal rights activists violate and challenge established symbolic boundaries in their attempts to extend moral concern and empathy to animals; they even try consciously to dismantle the symbolic boundary between humans and animals (Cherry 2010). To many people, this questioning of the exceptional position of human beings feels threatening. It is in this light that we should understand the strong reactions against animal rights activists and the aggressions that activists testify to. The reactions indicate that something sacred is at stake – for both sides. I submit that the animal rights issue is an exceedingly illustrative example of secular sacralism. As already pointed out by Durkheim, and developed by among others Joas (2000), the individual person has become sacralised in the modern world. Many people fear that human dignity will be compromised if the same rights and

obligations were extended to animals. This is why many people react so strongly against, for instance, drawing parallels between industrial meat production and the Holocaust. Here, two secular sacralisms collide – even if both are versions of the sacralised individual.

Rituals

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance (Ecclesiastes 3:4)

Collective ideals are celebrated first and foremost in rituals. Vegan meals are a case in point. They are an enactment of faith and the ideal is affirmed each time a life is spared. Thus, meals carry symbolic meaning for the activists and become acts of cleansing and purification, which is why Jamison, Wenk & Parker (2000: 319) speak of eating as a redemptive act. All religions have dietary rules and food taboos (e.g. Douglas 1991). As eating is something we do several times a day, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of meals for the vegan community. Common practices separate the activists from others and create a boundary of purity (Lowe 2001), and rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience (Douglas 1991: 2). As ritual is key to symbolic boundary-drawing (who belongs and who does not), qualifying the action of a group and making it autonomous in relation to other actors, it serves not just as moral but also symbolic reintegration (Sassoon 1984: 867ff; cf. Cherry 2010). Each meal is also a reminder of the normative clash with mainstream society. The informants for this study testify to how painful it is to eat together with meat-eaters, to experience the smell of meat etc., and to end up having to defend their eating habits against people who question their veganism. For the activists, meat-eating is profanation, while for the meat-eaters, comparisons between industrial farming and concentration camps are equally offensive. Again, two secular sacralisms collide.

According to Durkheim (2001: 317), a society “must assemble and concentrate” in order to periodically recreate itself, and in the process it also forms its ideals. Following Durkheim, then, rituals are essential for building collective identity, for sustaining moral commitment and also for invigorating the activists emotionally, as *collective effervescence* is generated in rituals. This invigorates the individual and gives her a momentary feeling of everything being possible, and thus a feeling of being able to transcend her own self-limitations. “You gain self-confidence and dare more”, as one informant said. The individual feels that she is part of something above and beyond herself. The collective effervescence and enthusiasm also help the individual transcend her own egoistic desires and tie her more closely to the collective and its ideal (Shilling & Mellor 2011). Thus rituals serve to increase the internal cohesion of the group as well as to give the emotional refill necessary for the continued struggle (Jacobsson & Lindblom 2013).

Participation in protest actions, such as public demonstrations, is a key type of ritual, by which a synchronization of bodies and fusion of minds is achieved (Peterson 2001). As one interviewed activist related:

[It] feels like a wonderful way for us in the movement to gather and march together. But also that it is public, that it is visible and noisy and that there are streamers and slogans.... You can't just sit at home and write letters to the editor and things like that. It feels good to have this emotional outlet, that you can yell out slogans and chant together with those who you know believe in the same thing. It is important to be many, and it's about showing others that we are many who are moving together.

As ritual-participants, the activists can feel joy and pride in their cause. According to some informants, it can also give emotional energy to share negative feelings, "it is great that someone is there to share pain and sorrow and then one gets energy out of that". In both cases, convictions are affirmed by collective practice.

Drawing on Durkheim, Collins (2001) has argued that rituals focus attention on common symbols important to the group. Symbols representing the faith – pictures of animals – are frequently used in demonstrations and public manifestations, for instance pictures of monkeys used in experiments (see also Jasper & Nelkin 1992; Jamison, Wenk & Parker 2000). As pointed out above, among activists, a ritual exposure to pictures, such as movies revealing cruelty to animals, is also a means of reminding oneself of the cause, and of reaffirming one's commitment.

Rituals are important in mobilizing collective action capacity and in community-building. However, it has been pointed out that rituals may be even more important for groups who see little tangible success of their struggle (Nepstad 2004: 54). Animal rights activists are of course a case in point – with the seemingly endless killing of animals for human ends. As was also pointed out above, group practice is of utmost importance for them. The rituals serve to "infuse" in the participants the sense of being on the right track and that "time will tell", as one informant puts it.

Conclusion

This article has sought to illustrate the usefulness of analyzing animal rights activism as an instance of secular religion. Although most of the activists interviewed are not religious in the traditional sense, we have seen that there are many parallels to a religious universe of meaning. For these activists, the issue of animal rights obtains the status of ultimate concern.

The article identified a number of elementary forms and experiences of religious life in animal rights activism, including an overwhelming conversion experiences, a division of the world into sacred and profane, concern about protecting the sacred, commitment to living out one's faith, the feeling that suffering and guilt have meaning, and the constitutive role of common symbols and rituals. It

has been suggested that these religious elements can best be understood in the light of the activist group as a moral community formed around a sacred ideal. A moral ideal held to be sacred drives the activists and creates a community of believers, based on a clear in- and out-group distinction; it is the blaze of the sacred that fuels the activists' passion and compels them to dedicate a considerable part of their time and energy to activism, even occasionally go against the laws of "this world". This is, in fact, true of other social movements; this analytical framework could be fruitfully applied to the radical and activist branches of other movements, as well. Nevertheless, the animal rights case is particularly interesting as it represents a very distinctive and controversial boundary-drawing between sacred and the profane. The sacralisation of the human person has here been extended to the sacralisation of the animal-individual.

There are also differences, however, between a secular religion and a theist system of beliefs. A secular faith, such as that of animal rights activism, is not necessarily a lifetime commitment. While some Christians, for instance, may cool off and apostate, belief in an Almighty God may prevent others from turning their backs on the deity. In contrast, the most intensive years of commitment and dedication to animal rights activism are for many a phase of life, after which a more pragmatic stance may prevail. It is very demanding to burn for such a cause and to be in conflict with mainstream society. The informants for this study were aware of this and expressed fear that they would lose their fervency later in life, that egoistic dispositions would come to dominate their lives. Such a loss would inevitably mean also a loss of community bonds.

Finally, I have suggested that the animal rights activists challenge established boundaries between sacred and profane by questioning our practices of eating the dead bodies of animals and the unique position granted to human beings. In doing so, they also contribute to moral reflexivity and moral development.

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Notes

- ¹ I gratefully acknowledge the generous comments on this article by many colleagues, the research collaboration with Niklas Hansson & Jonas Lindblom and the research funding from the Swedish Research Council.
- ² Durkheim has longly been criticized by religious science scholars for his universalist claims and essentialist view of religion (see e.g. Masuzawa 2005). Sociologists, on the other hand, tend to see his perspective as still very productive (e.g. Joas 2000; Shilling & Mellor 2011). This article indeed is intended to demonstrate the usefulness of his approach.
- ³ Theologian Tillich (1957: 1f) defined faith as ultimate concern. Bellah defined religion similarly as “a set of symbolic forms and acts which men relate to the ultimate condition of their existence” (quoted in Yinger 1970: 6).
- ⁴ Their tight social bonds and intensity of commitment has led some researchers to conceptualize (radical) activist groups as sects (e.g. Peterson 2001; cf. Jamison, Wenk, Parker 2000). They then draw on Weber’s (1963) distinction between church and sect, which has meanwhile been further developed by Troeltsch (1950/1931).
- ⁵ The quotes from the Bible are intended to draw a parallel between the activists’ universe of meaning and that of a traditional religion. The quotes express, for instance, the same type of commitment and imperative to act.
- ⁶ All interview quotes are translated from Swedish into English by the author.
- ⁷ In Lowe’s and Ginsberg’s questionnaire, based on US data, only 25% of the respondents had experienced sudden conversion while (58%) responded that their engagement had grown gradually. However, their sample covered the broader movement, including also animal welfare activists.

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