

*Contrasting Community and Individualistic
Perceptions of Spirituality:
Anabaptists Versus Spirit Wrestlers*

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ABSTRACT: This paper elaborates two fundamental definitions of spirituality—the traditional position that there are two spheres of existence—realistic and transcendental, and humanism, which denies the existence an extraterrestrial sphere. Elaboration of Doukhobor and Mennonite belief systems reveals differences in defining spirituality, namely individualism versus community conceptualizations. Doukhobors place a high value on individual spirituality, contending that every individual has a Divine spark (Iskra) within them. Mennonites value community-defined and validated forms of spirituality.

RESUME: Dans cet article, on explique la spiritualité selon deux principes dominants. Le premier qui est la pensée traditionnelle, reconnaît la vie dans deux mondes ; le monde réel et le monde transcendant. Le second qui est la pensée humaniste, rejette la vie dans l'au-delà. Les Doukhobors et les Mennonites sont persuadés que la spiritualité appelée, individualisme, s'oppose aux notions de collectivité. Les Doukhobors valorisent la spiritualité individuelle car chaque homme porte en lui un morceau de divinité (Iskra). Les Mennonites, eux valorisent ce qui est défini par la collectivité et qui est validé par les formes de spiritualité.

Introduction

Discussions about the concept of spirituality have increased dramatically in recent decades, and a Google search will yield millions of sites featuring a vast array of conceptualizations. A classic debate between two major alternative interpretations emanates from the related literature, namely that belief in religion may or may not be eliminated from the discussion. Traditionally religionists and spiritualists postulated the existence of what might be called a transcendental or extraterrestrial source of power that was available to earnest seekers. Although spirituality has often associated with religion, today many scholars claim that personal spirituality can be developed outside of religion—principally from within oneself, and without postulating the existence of a Higher Power or any form of mystic transcendence. A brief look at varying definitions of spirituality may underscore the nature and importance of the debate. Since spiritual concerns are very much a part of human culture, they must not be ignored or put aside as a non-academic issue or viewed as important only to devotees.

Introduction

To begin with, etymologically the word *spiritual* means anything that relates to spirit or soul and not to physical nature and matter. Many dictionaries of philosophy provide two basic definitions—one close to the Greek word *pneuma* as an internal force, and the other related to the mind, or “rational soul,” as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) postulated it in his theory of aesthetics namely, a manifestation of the intellectual capacity to apprehend reality. To Georg Hegel’s (1770-1831) way of thinking in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the word spirit denoted nothing about transcendence or the existence of a superior external source of power.

It is interesting to note that traditional interpretations of spirituality are still operational. The Ohio State University Student Wellness Center, for example, defines spirituality as acknowledging the existence of “a higher power, whether rooted in a religion, nature, or some kind of unknown essence” (OSU.EDU). Similarly, the University of Maryland’s Medical Centre has posted this statement:

Spirituality may mean a belief in a power operating in the universe that is greater than oneself, a sense of interconnectedness with all living creatures, and an awareness of the purpose and meaning of life and the development of personal, absolute values. It's the way you find meaning, hope, comfort, and inner peace in your life (UofMMC).

A traditionally grounded definition of spirituality leaves references to religion intact, but some scholars prefer discussions about spirituality in terms of purely human experience. These individuals argue that the terms religion and spirituality should not be used interchangeably, because spirituality must be viewed strictly as a humanistic phenomenon. It is this perspective that fuels the

dichotomy between faith and reason, mostly valorizing the material view. Traditionalists and pro-religious groups disagree with this perspective; they perceive supernaturalism as an available resource from another, higher realm—beyond that of the human world.

To illustrate the complexity of defining spirituality from a religious perspective, it is important to note that philosophers writing at the beginning of the modern period wrestled hard with Saint Paul's postulations about the existence of a two-tiered universe. This statement represents Saint Paul's perception of the universe in relation to the hereafter: "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (I Corinthians 13:12, New International Version). This statement clearly explicates St. Paul's contention that two layers of knowing exist. This concept was explored by Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who tried to describe the *City of God* as something created out of material reality. Augustine also proposed that the two layers—soul and body, had to be in harmony to make it possible for humankind to enter the ultimate realm of goodness.

René Descartes (1596-1650), a French thinker who has sometimes been called the "Father of Modern philosophy," employed an ontological argument when he postulated that a spiritual realm exists beyond the world of humankind. He began by accepting the reality of self, then speculated that people are not perfect but can perceive the *possibility* of perfection; therefore such a realm must exist (Butler, 1968, p. 225). A German mathematician, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) was more specific and proposed that the universe is made up of three-tiered "monads," almost analogous to the notion of molecules. Leibniz described the first order of simple monads as having quite general perceptions and desires. The second order of more complex monads possesses "soul," and has greater awareness and sharper perceptions. Animals would fit into this order of monads. The one characteristic that differentiates humankind from animals is the ability to reason. Human bodies exist as simple monads, and the human spirit, along with the ability to reason, comprises the second order of monads. The fact that humans also possess spirit, however, provides the potential to achieve a relationship with God, the Creator of all things," who is singularly a monad of the third type, unique, and without limitations (Butler, 1966, pp. 10-17).

In similar fashion, Portuguese-Dutch philosopher, Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) developed a concept known as the Doctrine of Substance by which he explained the existence of what Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) later called the *noumenal* world or, ultimate world of ideas. Spinoza speculated that the "Substance" he was describing could be called God in an ultimate sense, and God should be perceived as having two attributes—extension and thought (Butler, 1966, p. 11). Humankind, although a more stretched out version of Substance, was created with a limited quality of thinking. Elaborated further this would imply that human nature is partially made up of Divine Substance. As the Book of Genesis (1:26, New International Version) records:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

George Berkeley (1685-1753), who later in life became an Irish Bishop, formulated this famous slogan, “to be is to be perceived,” to imply that the existence of humankind could only be a reality because human activity was being perceived by the Ultimate Power, namely God (Stump, 1993, p. 274). God, who is the Creator of truth, is “out there,” and His existence and attributes make it possible for humans to perceive sensations, notions, ideas, or impressions of the senses. Thus the character of knowledge is based on the necessary stratum of the objective world; it is Spirit, Infinite Mind, or God (Butler, 1966, p. 21). Later, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), suggested that being able to perceive spirituality is the most important rule for human action since “a Will moves the universe and animates nature” (Rousseau, 1979, p. 273). By listening to an innate inner sentiment, provided by Providence, individuals can achieve images of Divine conscience and with reference to it, avoid undesirable bodily passions. As Rousseau (1979, p. 286) stated:

In listening to what it says to our senses, we despise what it says to our hearts; the active being obeys, the passive being commands. Conscience is the voice of the soul; the passions are the voice of the body.

In contrast to exhortations for individuals to reply on institutionalized definitions of spirituality, Rousseau encouraged individuals to delve deeply into their souls in pursuit of the natural sentiments imprinted their by Providence. The end result would be a spiritual orientation based on innate sentiments, not derived from external forces, and thereby attune human hearts to understand nature’s mysteries.

Immanuel Kant is sometimes called the “Father of Transcendentalism” because he too believed in the existence of a dualistic universe—the virtually unknowable *noumenal* world, and the *phenomenological* world or, world of human dwelling. According to Kant, ideas, or transcendent imperative forms, which are the ground of reality as we perceive it, exist in the mind prior to experience. Parallel to Descartes’ thinking, humankind is perceived as living in an imperfect world, but it can be improved by forming a relationship with the universe’s higher spiritual and moral principles (Gutek, 2014, p. 29). Thus Descartes, Rousseau, and Kant all stress the importance of maintaining a relationship with Divinity as a way to improve moral deeds. Available tools by which to accomplish this include Descartes’ notion of *ratio*, Rousseau’s fundamental lever designated as *the will*, and Kant’s interpretation of moral action as a combination of *pure reason* and *practical reason*). Johann Gottlieb Fichte, (1762-1814), a disciple of Kant’s followed up on his mentor’s speculations by contending that only a true philosopher or “scholar” can decipher reliable meanings from the noumenal world.

The foregoing discussion is relevant to the reality of contemporary organized religion. Can religion, organized religion, that is, still be of value to individuals who embark on a spiritual search? If it may be allowed that individuals have a basic need to believe in something outside of the earth's sphere, perhaps answers to questions of a metaphysical nature from prepackaged sources—such as religious organizations, are not entirely without value. Prepackaged answers to queries about eschatological concerns or the meaning of life may satisfy the whimsical seeker, and this may not necessarily be a negative phenomenon. Some individuals prefer to have someone else decide such matters for them. Many place faith in individuals or institutions that offer prepackaged formats of belief designed to provide guidance in spiritual matters. That should be their privilege. Since the discovery of individual DND has scientifically verified biological individuality why not allow that it may also be applied to the spiritual domain (Friesen, 1995, pp. 36-37).

Following a more traditional interpretation of spirituality, this paper will address and analyze two religious expressions of spirituality—that of contemporary Mennonites as representatives of traditional Anabaptism, and a contrast of their view with a brief case study of Spirit Wrestlers (Doukhobors) in Canada. Adherents to the former persuasion tend to value community interpretation and approval of expressed spiritual experiences, while the Doukhobors foster a strong belief in individuality when it comes to spiritual experience and practice. Both groups allege to be adherents to a form of Christianity.

Background Check: The Mennonites

It is interesting to note that Mennonites and Doukhobors were once neighbors in southern Russia, although their backgrounds are quite different. Mennonites, who originated in Europe, claim a direct lineage to Anabaptism, originally a reactionary Protestant belief system made up of many different subcultures including Amish, Hutterites, and various kinds of Mennonites. Truly representative of the diversity that identified the nature of historic Anabaptism, the movement continues to distinguish itself by occasionally giving birth to breakaway subgroups. This section will deal specifically with Mennonites only and by way of illustration make reference to three subsections of that community—Mennonite Brethren, Mennonite Church Canada, and Old Colony Mennonites. It has been estimated that there are more than thirty different kinds of Mennonite religious communities in southern Manitoba alone.

The Anabaptist movement began in Europe as a radical offshoot of Protestantism, and Mennonites constitute one such division. Primary Anabaptist beliefs include viewing the Bible as an open book (but individual interpretations are subject to approval by the community of believers), separation of church and state, pacifism, and rejection of Sacraments, taking oaths, and infant baptism (Harder, 1949, pp. 21-22). Mennonite groups have sought to maintain belief in these principles to this day.

Persecuted for their beliefs, most European Mennonites fled to Russia during the 1770s at the invitation of Catherine the Great (1729-1796). A century later they migrated to Canada and the United States because the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (Bolsheviks) passed laws to restrict their interpretation of religious freedom. After settling on two reserves in southern Manitoba in the 1870s, the Mennonites spawned new divisions and gradually migrated to inviting areas in most of Canada's ten provinces.

The Mennonite church in Russia experienced a major split in 1860 when the Mennonite Brethren Church was formed. Convinced that the larger church was deviating from orthodox Anabaptist principles, the Mennonite Brethren Church essentially bought into Baptist theology and differentiated itself from the larger church by adopting baptism of adults only, and that solely by immersion. Although maintaining adherence to fairly rigid theological dogma, today one would be hard-pressed to differentiate the religious practices of the Mennonite Brethren from any other more evangelically oriented Christian body (Canadian Conference). Today there are 35,000 Mennonite Brethren in Canada who worship in 250 congregations.

A second group, now known as Mennonite Church Canada, comprises a merger of two former Canadian denominations, the first being the "Old Mennonite Church," whose origins date back to 1683 when Mennonites in Europe first began to migrate to the United States to escape persecution. Many of their members moved to Canada in 1786 because they did not endorse the American quest for independence. The other denomination in the merger was known as the General Conference Mennonite Church, made up of Mennonites who left Russia for Canada in the 1870s. A merger of the two denominations was completed in 1999 and consists of 32,000 members who worship in more than 225 congregations. Somewhat soft on promoting strict doctrinal statements, this denomination stresses that the community of believers ought to be involved in social justice, efforts to alleviate poverty, and the peace movement.

The third selected subgroup of Mennonites is known as Old Colony Mennonites, and functions somewhat like the Amish or Hutterites in practice. These groups represent the most conservative branches of Anabaptism. Old Colony Mennonites specifically believe very much in tradition—often expressing their theological position using the phrase; "We wish to do as we were taught" (Mennonite Central Committee). Tradition is the vehicle Old Colony Mennonites use to ensure that this separateness is maintained. Judging by their numbers and annual growth rate of four percent, the Old Colony Mennonites will no doubt endure. They currently number about 150,000 and are located in various countries around the world, with 5,000 of them resident in five Canadian provinces.

Arriving in Manitoba in the 1870s, the utmost concern of the Old Colony Mennonites centered on the preservation of their way of life. From their point of view their total cultural pattern including language, clothing, education, furniture, self-government, mutual aid, village pattern, and all forms of customs were considered integral parts of their concept of Christianity. Church leaders tried to preserve the most extreme form of separation from the world and the

practice of church discipline by means of the ban and avoidance of excommunicated individuals. Not only was contact with dominant society reduced to bare necessities, but the challenge that came through contact with other religious groups and the outside culture was also neutralized.

The Old Colony Mennonite interpretation of spirituality is that it can best be fulfilled through the strength of the community from whose dictates individuals should not depart. Expectations regarding individual spirituality are enclasped in Old Colony culture, and rarely discussed because of the strong sense of uncertainty that surrounds it. Individuals can never be assured that they have in any way attained Divine contact or favor, and it is best not to make claims about the experience. At most one might hear statements like this: "I trust I will be saved," or, "My mother would always speak in terms of hoping be saved." Plett (2001, p. 33) suggests that by comparison Evangelical churches tend to emphasize the past in terms of having attained salvation, for example, "I have been saved," whereas more conservative churches, like Old Colony Mennonites, emphasize the future tense, namely, "I trust I will be saved." Above all Old Colony adherents who do claim that they have experienced God's favor, even if only in a hopeful sense, will need to have their testimonies corroborated by the community of faith. In a sense this belief correlates with the philosophic notion of correspondence theory; that is, the truth or falsity of a statement of claim must be validated by existing interpretations approved by the community of faith. Individuals cannot claim validity of a spiritual experience on their own.

Background Check: Spirit Wrestlers

In 1899, a large contingent of 7,500 Russian "Spirit Wrestlers" (now known as Doukhobors) immigrated to Canada in accordance with an invitation by Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior. The Doukhobors settled as farmers on homestead lands allotted to them near what is now the Saskatchewan-Manitoba border. During this period of Canadian immigration it was quite unusual to have that many newcomers arrive at one time. Their large numbers immediately attracted attention from the media as well as from their neighbors. Farmers who lived near the newly arrived Doukhobors found it difficult to understand the communal lifestyle and belief system of these immigrants. The Doukhobors believed in communalism, vegetarianism, hereditary leadership, and complete separation of church and state, and they rejected military involvement, organized forms of religion, and the office of clergy (Friesen, 1983, p. 73). They also preferred to use only the Psalms portion of the Bible, and perceived other biblical content as good literature. They argued that God actively continues to speak to His children and should not be restricted to descriptions of His presence from past writings. Clearly their Christian practices took some getting used to by their neighbors.

As soon as the Doukhobors arrived on the prairies, they set about building 57 communal villages as well as several prayer homes and Russian language schools. Shortly thereafter the Canadian government reneged on the promise that the Doukhobors would be exempt from swearing allegiance to the Crown.

On hearing the news the Doukhobors almost immediately separated into three factions: (i) the orthodox, who relocated to British Columbia to settle on land that other parties had previously purchased, thus avoiding the dreaded oath of allegiance; (ii) the Independents, who *did* take the oath, thereby allowing some of them to remain on portions of previously settled communal lands; and, (iii) the more radical Sons of Freedom who in 1902 staged a public protest that engaged one thousand souls. Later this group followed the orthodox group to British Columbia. All three factions continued to believe in the concept of *Iskra*, (from Russian, 'искра', meaning spark) albeit to varying degrees.

The origin of the Doukhobors is itself an unusual story (Friesen and Verigin, 1996). During the 17th century in Russia, a religious leader, born with the name Nikita Minin and later known as Patriarch Nikon (1605-1681), functioned as Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church from 1652-1658. During this time he promoted the merger of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Greek Orthodox Church. To that end he initiated a series of Greek reforms that spurred some 200 subgroups to leave the church. One of those groups was the Doukhobors whom an archbishop named Ambrosius dubbed "Doukhobortsy," meaning Spirit Wrestlers. The archbishop claimed that the Doukhobors were fighting against the spirit of the church. The Doukhobors adopted the name, arguing that they wrestled in the spirit, not against it. A subsequent interpretation of their new name produced the term *Iskra*, a term to denote the belief that every individual possesses a Divine spark, or a little bit of Divinity. This personal connection to God is expected to encourage quite individual interpretations of religious belief and behavior.

Economically speaking, the Doukhobors managed quite well after leaving the Russian Orthodox Church. Their most prominent leader in Russia was Luker'ia Evna Cubanova, who took over after her husband Peter passed on. Luker'ia was responsible for the Golden Age of the Doukhobors (1864-1884), and reigned over the commune for two generations. Although she operated in conjunction with an advisory board, Luker'ia basically functioned like a benevolent dictator. She saw to it that no one was unemployed, and no one went hungry. Relapsing offenders were punished by public whippings, and a husband who was mean to his wife were locked up in a chicken coop overnight (Woodcock and Avakumovic, 1977, p. 73). When it came time for Luker'ia to retire, she personally trained a young man named Peter Vasil'evich Verigin to take her place. It was Verigin who basically oversaw the Doukhobor migration to Canada in 1899.

Expressions of Spirituality

Over time, religious groups associated with the Anabaptist tradition have come to vary a great deal in theological beliefs and practice. More recently the patterned practices of several liberal Mennonite denominations have come to resemble those of mainline Christian denominations, and a wide array of more conservative groups have emerged on the other end of the spectrum. Generally speaking, however, Anabaptist groups insist that Christians be guided by the

Word of God (the Bible) that has been inspired and illuminated by the Spirit of God. Resultant interpretations must be checked out *within* community constraints, and this leaves theologically little room for individual or charismatic expression. Both the Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Church Canada represent the liberal end of the spectrum, albeit distinguishable by minor differences. Mennonite Brethren emphasize what is fundamentally a evangelical theology, and are proud of the fact that their members have more than a working knowledge of the Scriptures (Canadian Conference). Both denominations adhere to an ethnic base in interpreting spirituality.

Many Mennonite Brethren are involved in successful business enterprises and related professions, making them appear more upper middle class than their conservative counterparts. However, there often appears to be a contradiction between their alleged obedience to biblical principles for daily living and actual Christian practice. As one of their theologians, Delbert Wiens, points out, Mennonite Brethren are in need of transforming the inner experience of attractive “wineskins” or theological containers, to daily practice (Regehr, 1996, p. 300). Religious principles are expressed in social, cultural, and religious forms, but these are not always clearly differentiated nor effectively released. The end result is that spirituality is clothed in intellectually inclined theological terms without manifesting relevant expression. Even then, all expressions are subject to approval by the community of faith (Hertzler, 1973, p. 24; Miller, 2000, p. 2).

Mennonite Church Canada does not readily differentiate between ethnicity and religion, assuming they are part and parcel of the same phenomenon. Less explicit in announcing adherence to specific, biblically-based theological beliefs, this denomination stresses the importance of a culture of worship—Mennonites coming together to worship in an atmosphere of appreciation for their unique history and identity (Hertzler, 1973, p. 18). Like Mennonite Brethren, they emphasize outreach and evangelism, and both denominations have been quite successful in off-shore missionary endeavors, but not in achieving an equally expanded base on the home front. Mennonite Church Canada is also more concerned with issues such as fair labor practices, social welfare, and issues of justice.

Writing from a Mennonite Church Canada perspective, Roth (2011, p. 98) warns about the danger of seeing Christian practice fall into the mode of many Christians who think of worship primarily as something that transpires for two hours on Sunday morning in a church building, or in other conscious acts of prayer or piety. There must be an active involvement in the world, but not necessarily in conjunction *with* the world. Like Mennonite Brethren, members of this denomination are active in many politically linked professions including local government, law, and provincial and federal politics (Urry, 2006). Despite these linkages, religious practice is always in need of community-based approval. As the vision statement of Mennonite Church Canada emphasizes:

God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit to grow as communities of grace, joy and peace so that

God's healing and hope flow through us to the world.... We are a *community of disciples* of Jesus, A part of the Body of Christ, covenanted together as congregations (Mennonite Church Canada, italics mine).

Conservative Anabaptist congregations avoid virtually all contact with the outside world except for necessary business associations or, in some cases, tourism, the latter being a forte among Amish and Hutterites, but not Old Colony Mennonites. The latter group prefers to keep to themselves in all avenues, including schooling if possible. The historical record indicates that a myriad of migrations by Old Colony Mennonites have occurred, thereby allowing them to escape the enforcement of public education. Nevertheless, some of their adherents *do* get concerned about the resultant dilemma, as illustrated in the novel, *Strangled Roots*, when, the main character, Frank Tilitsky migrates to the city in search of employment. On discovering that his limited education will permit him to obtain only low paying jobs, only, he tells himself; "Frank Tilitsky, your future is nothing!" (Quiring, 1982, p. 127). The preferred Old Colony form of religious expression is a somewhat tedious repetition of historically originated hymns, lengthy prayers, and "sung" sermons. Spirituality per se is seldom a topic for discussion.

Our Russian immigrant friends, the "Spirit Wrestlers," have an entirely different perception of spirituality. Doukhobors believe very much in the existence of a spirit world governed by a Higher Power, and it is expected that individuals will connect with that world through the auspices of the Divine spark (*Iskra*) within them. Doukhobors believe that spirituality is primarily individually based in comparison to the Anabaptist emphasis on the community of faith. This belief appears to controvert the Doukhobor penchant for communal living, but community Doukhobors are quick to differentiate physical and material elements of life from experiences in the spiritual realm. It is not immediately clear just how believer's lives are enlightened or enriched through spiritual contact, but a variety of avenues appear to exist—particularly through religious gatherings. Divine revelation, if this concept is appropriate, can occur within or without a corporate setting.

When orthodox Doukhobors gather in their sanctuaries (now known as "prayer homes,") for worship, prayers are said, and psalms are sung. A sung psalm begins with an individual soloing the first line by himself/herself, regardless of age or station. It is quite acceptable to be aware that spiritual enrichment may flow to any individual within that gathering. It is also quite possible that a Divine message may be imparted to an individual when he or she is engaged in personal worship. Since approval by a community of faith is not necessary to initiate changes in behavior that might occur as a result of having been spiritually enlightened, it is possible that discrepancies might occur between what the community of faith and the individual in question might regard as appropriate.

In the end, individuality will prevail; Divine contact is entirely a personal matter.

Conclusion

Although once long time neighbors in Russia, Mennonites and Doukhobors maintain quite different perceptions of spirituality. Sectors of the two communities have remained in communication after migrating to Canada, and occasionally exchange formal acknowledgments. Apparently, differences of opinion on spiritual matters appear not to constitute sufficient grounds for ethnic exclusivity. Both Mennonite and Doukhobor interpretations of spirituality are premised on the belief in a Higher Power and have been retained while living in Canada. Mennonites, regardless of denominational splintering, cling to the notion of community approval as validation of spiritual claims, while Doukhobors continue to stress individuality in spiritual searching. Perhaps this might explain why Mennonites communities have managed to retain their numbers, while Doukhobor membership in Canada is steadily declining.

Only the future will tell how these visions and membership numbers will play out.

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