5-10-2021

Mutual Aid as Spiritual Tacit Knowledge Within Doukhobor Epistemology

Rachel L. Neubuhr Torres
Portland State University

Mutual Aid as Spiritual Tacit Knowledge Within Doukhobor Epistemology

By Rachel L. Neubuhr Torres

Undergraduate Honors Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Arts degree from Portland State University Honors College & the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Advised by:

Christopher Brooks, Ph.D.

Portland State University 2021

Introduction

Within the philosophical field of epistemology is the theory of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge, also called practical knowledge, is knowledge that cannot be explained. It is how many people groups seem to have practices that become second nature to members of a culture or group, such as the ability to navigate the seas in a small boat or speak a native language. Applying tacit knowledge to the study of religion and spirituality allows us to think about how we connect with the world and how we address the concern of what one feels to be true of their existence, or existential intuition.

In the latter half of the 1800s the Russian prince turned anarchist, Peter Kropotkin, wrote extensively on the theory of mutually beneficial cooperation, or mutual aid, as being one of the most important factors of evolution. His series of essays—which covers the existence of mutual aid from within the animal kingdom, to primitive peoples, to the nature of the city state, and to modern humanity—critiqued social Darwinism as it was becoming a more popular idea within various fields of study across western Europe.

As Kropotkin began writing his series of essays, a group of spiritual folk-Christians known as the Doukhobors were living communally in the Transcaucasian region of the Russian Empire. Native to the region of modern-day Ukraine, they became a target of persecution by Russian Empire officials and Orthodox clergy members and were periodically forced to relocate to various regions of the state. Their relocation to the Caucus' was their final within the Russian Empire as discrimination and oppression forced their exodus to Canada in 1899. What kept them together was their faith: unwavering pacifism, the rejection of liturgical authority, and their strength in togetherness. Mutual aid has been a core element of Doukhobor spiritual practice

since their formation and is itself a form of tacit knowledge within their spiritual culture, which in turn illuminates the persistence of their practices and beliefs against the backdrop of persecution and displacement they experienced.

Tacit Knowledge & Spiritual Pedagogy

A common example of what tacit knowledge is would be how we are able to distinguish a familiar face among hundreds of other faces. One may also consider how musical instruments are played or how cars are driven; you could read about these processes, study them, but it is unlikely that driveability and musical prestige could be gained from this alone. The idea of tacit knowledge was pioneered by Michael Polanyi who stated that "we can know more than we can tell"[1]. Tacit knowledge is not mutually exclusive to the fields we can empirically measure, though. In his article *Tacit Knowledge and Spiritual Pedagogy*, Ronald Lee Zigler states that "what is apparently overlooked is Polanyi's belief that tacit knowledge is an important component to all areas of human understanding—including those areas normally termed religious, moral or spiritual"[2].

There are very few articles discussing the presence of tacit knowledge within the field of religion and spirituality. In fact, I could only find a small handful of references during my search, which is why I heavily reference Zigler. Other sources, such as Delia Freudenreich's 2011 book *Spiritualität von Kindern-was sie ausmacht und wie sie pädagogisch gefördert werden kann: Forschungsbericht über die psychologische und pädagogische Diskussion im anglophonen*

[1] Polanyi, Michael, and Sen, Amartya. The Tacit Dimension. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 6
[2] Zigler, Ronald Lee. "Tacit Knowledge and Spiritual Pedagogy." *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 20, no. 2 (1999), 162

Raum, are either not accessible to the English speaker or they are more of a discussion on children's pedagogy (see Cornelia Roux's article *Children's spirituality in social context: a South African example*). Zigler does discuss the role of spiritual tacit knowledge within pedagogy, but his article examines the connection between tacit knowledge and religion more in depth.

The Doukhobors—an ethno-religious group residing in Canada—have a tumultuous history involving several resettlements and severe persecution within the former Russian Empire and, later on, in Canada. The specific aim of this paper is to discuss their epistemology and how it relates to tacit knowledge. By discussing Zigler's assessment of Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge, and analyzing the specifics of Doukhobor faith systems, we can discuss how Doukhobor tacit knowledge informs their epistemology.

The relationship between tacit knowledge and religion is rarely explored. Zigler considers this to be unfortunate and states that "Polanyi not only recognized the significance of the moral/religious/spiritual domains of inquiry for human welfare, but he also acknowledged the relevance of tacit knowing to their advancement"[3]. Polanyi did not deny that one's personal beliefs could interfere with inquiry, but instead argued that our beliefs guide and support inquiry. However, this inquiry is not meant to over analyze every fine detail, because Polanyi also argued that strict empiricism makes a "ruthless mutilation of human experience"[4], suggesting in *The Tacit Dimension* that "unbridled lucidity can destroy our understanding of complex matters"[5]. Zigler uses Polanyi's viewpoint of understanding to articulate a theory of the tacit element of

[3] Zigler, 162
[4] Polanyi, Michael. The Study of Man. Lindsay Memorial Lectures; 1958. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959, 21
[5] Polanyi, Michael. The Tacit Dimension. Doubleday Anchor Book; A540. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1967, 18

spiritual understanding, stating that "spiritual understanding involves this capacity to tacitly sense a broader, more inclusive pattern of meaning or purpose in life" and that "Polanyi indicated that our capacity for tacit knowing of any kind is undermined by an excessive preoccupation with, or obsessive focus on details and explicit parts"[6]. Where tacit knowledge extends to experiences such as recognizing faces and ability to drive a vehicle, Zigler describes the issue of obsessive focus by using the example of looking at a holograph. You can observe every surface surrounding the holograph, but you will never see the three-dimensional holographic object until you refocus your eyes to an "imaginary distance." Zigler uses this example to show how "an obsession with detail can obscure human experience"[7]. He then applies this analogy to spiritual understanding, stating that it entails a capacity to appreciate a sense of wholeness into our part of human consciousness that connects to the tacit domain (subsidiary awareness).

Zigler's ultimate focus on pedagogy has to do with the notion that there is often a master and apprentice relationship when it comes to obtaining tacit knowledge. This implies that for tacit knowledge to spread, one must learn from someone who already has this knowledge to pass on. We can think of the music teacher imparting musical ability onto their students, or the college professor instilling mathematical ability into theirs. Only the skilled may pass on their skill. Zigler's article argues, then, that "if spiritual understanding or intelligence can be understood as a skill […] then the transmission of this skill must to some extent follow the model that Polanyi suggests defines the transmission of our tacit fund of knowledge and understanding"[8]. However, Zigler is also concerned about the relationship formed between a

[6] Zigler, 164
[7] Zigler, 165
[8] Zigler, 166

spiritual teacher and their pupil(s), and how this impacts their ability to pass on spiritual epistemology. He discusses Philip Wexler's book *Holy Sparks: Social Theory, Education, and Religion,* and how Wexler draws from Jewish philosopher Martin Buber and emphasizes the importance of the "vital presence of the teacher to the process of nurturing the spiritual domain"[9]. This nurturing relationship between the spiritual teacher and the student is important to the ways in which the student acquires spiritual tacit knowledge. The concepts of spiritual epistemology and religious tacit knowledge are essential to understanding Doukhobor epistemology. Taking the frameworks laid out by Polanyi and Zigler, we can shape an understanding of how it is Doukhobor tacit knowledge that informs their epistemology.

The Doukhobors & The Living Book

The Doukhobors are a folk-Protestant group indigenous to the former Russian Empire (from modern-day areas of Russia and Ukraine). They evolved out of the Bezpopovtsy Raskolniks that divided the Old Believers in the 1600s. Their beliefs and practices, which still exist today, included pacifism, vegetarianism, commitment to hard work, and rejection of secular governments. Their name originally stemmed from an insult as it means "spirit wrestler," and was meant to imply that they were wrestling against the spirit of God. In perfect antiauthoritarian fashion, the Doukhobors took the name and reappropriated it to mean that they were wrestling alongside the spirit of God against the church and Russian government.

[9] Wexler, Philip. Holy Sparks: Social Theory, Education, and Religion. 1st ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996, 143

During their time within the Russian Empire the Doukhobors were periodically resettled across various parts of the state before finally being allocated to the Caucus region. They remained deeply spiritual and communal despite these challenges and were able to maintain their culture. Up until the nineteenth century they had been able to avoid military conscription based on their unwavering belief in pacifism, but in 1895, which was a time of rising Russian nationalism, the Doukhobors were conscripted into the military. This was a major challenge to their pacifism because this practice did not only stem from the belief of not causing harm but more so from the belief that God dwells within each person and, so, to kill another person would be to kill a part of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the Doukhobors protested against conscription. In the summer of 1895 Doukhobors across Transcaucasia amassed their rifles into piles and lit them ablaze.

The resulting persecution was severe. They were set upon by Cossacks on horses, armed with lead-tipped whips, as the horses trampled into the Doukhobors. Cossacks whipped into them indiscriminately, ripping one man's eye out. George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic narrate history in *The Doukhobors* and describe how "the Doukhobors resisted passively, drawing their injured comrades within the circle, huddling together and offering their own bodies to the whips, so that all should share in the torment"[10]. The severity of their persecution drew attention from Count Leo Tolstoy, who took it upon himself to help get the Doukhobors out of the Russian Empire. With the help of several others, including a group of Quakers, Tolstoy was able to negotiate for their resettlement in Canada. Although the Doukhobors no longer faced physically violent persecution, their arrival in Canada quickly became problematic as they faced

[10] Woodcock, George, and Avakumovic, Ivan. *The Doukhobors*. Carleton Library; No. 108. Toronto : Ottawa: McClelland and Stewart ; Institute of Canadian Studies, Carleton University, 1977, 102

external judgement and prejudice. Julie Rak, professor of English and Film studies at the University of Alberta, wrote in her book *Negotiated Memory: Doukhobor Autobiographical Discourse* how once arriving in Canada,

> their belief in pacifism, anti-patriotism, communal living, and vegetarianism, along with their desire to retain their own language and their deep suspicion of institutionalization of any kind, proved to be threatening to many who were developing ideas about Canada and what it should mean to be Canadian. This resulted in a struggle that highlights what type of nation Canada was at the turn of the last century, and why, until very recently, the Doukhobors have had so much difficulty living in it.[11]

The Doukhobors encountered many challenges due to the prejudice they faced, not only from Anglo-Canadian judgements but also from the Canadian government. Once met with broken promises from the state, such as the right to own property communally and being denied rights unless they swore oaths, some members began protesting by stripping off their clothing and marching nude. Several schisms happened within the group resulting in one portion that stayed in Saskatchewan and assimilated as individual landowners, a second portion relocated to the province of British Columbia (B.C.) to try and stay as a community, and a third portion that became zealous in their anarchism to the point of burning down their own properties and schools. The latter group was known as the Sons of Freedom, or Freedomites, and media scrutiny caused not only them to be negatively politicized but used this version of the Doukhobors as the image of all Doukhobors.

[11] Rak, Julie. *Negotiated Memory: Doukhobor Autobiographical Discourse*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004, viii

Methods to forcibly assimilate the Doukhobors were carried out for years, and in the 1950s the government of British Columbia forcibly removed Freedomite (Doukhobor) children from their homes and placed them into a residential school in New Denver, B.C. The children were kept away from their families and forced to learn a secular curriculum that did not allow them to retain their unique dialect of Doukhobor Russian. This forced assimilation of the Doukhobors and their children did what it does to any other group: they faced a loss of their culture, identity, and epistemology.

The Doukhobors were largely illiterate, even after leaving the Russian Empire, and so their religious and cultural knowledge was passed down orally in what is known as *Zhivotnaia Kniga* (The Living Book). *The Living Book* is ever changing and expanding and is conveyed by the Doukhobors through songs and psalms. Rak describes in the first chapter of *Negotiated Memory* that "Doukhobor epistemology is verbal, embodied, and dialogic: *it requires more than one person to transmit knowledge* and to make change, whether that change is spiritual, material, or both" (my emphasis)[12]. The Living Book also involves an interdependence of Doukhobor spiritual tacit knowledge rooted in ideas about community and collectivity. This requirement of having more than one person to transmit knowledge echoes Polanyi's and Zigler's concepts that spiritual tacit knowledge is acquired when person-to-person understanding occurs. *The Living Book* was not published in writing until 1954 and was originally published as *Zhivotnaia kniga Dukhobortsev*[13].

[12] Rak, 1

[13] *The Book of Life of the Doukhobors* (The Living Book). 1978. Edited by Vladimir BonchBruevich. Translated by Victor O. Buyniak. Doukhobor Societies of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon and Blaine Lake: Blaine Lake. Originally published in 1954 as Zhivotnaia kniga Dukhobortsev. Winnipeg: Union of Doukhobors of Canada.

Along with *zhivotnaiia kniga* there exists another aspect to Doukhobor epistemology called *vechnaiia pamit* (eternal memory). This oral history is a key part of the non-institutional way that knowledge of Doukhoborism is conveyed through each new generation. Here I quote from Rak at length, because to shorten it would do an injustice to the depth of *vechnaiia pamit*. Rak describes how

> *[v]echnaiia pamit* is a recitation of the community's history in sacred terms, as in Doukhobor psalm 355 from *The Living Book*, which begins with 'eternal memory be to our righteous forefathers who were buried as the true Doukhobors' and which continues with an account of the 1801 migration to Milky Waters. The latter was a sacred act because it was undertaken 'for the sake of the truth'; it was a migration to an area referred to as 'our Promised Land.' In contrast, the region of the Transcaucasus, the Doukhobors' subsequent place of migration, is referred to as 'our Land of Suffering.' The listener is finally exhorted to continue the community traditions for 'whoever else remains alive and hears of this history, should not desist from continuing these deeds to the end' (The Living Book 1978, 256). *Vechnaiia pamit* is a historical recounting, a sacred interpretation of migration, and an exhortation to keep the faith.[14]

Zigler suggests that there are three main points between spiritual epistemology and spiritual pedagogy. The first is that spiritual pedagogy, which is based on tacit knowledge, can be defined by a skill to sense meaning and purpose in life. The second point is that the aforementioned skill is rooted in the ability to understand a sense of wholeness into our portion of human consciousness that connects to the tacit domain (subsidiary awareness). The third point is that

[14] Rak, 61-62

this awareness is receptive and nurtured by the lessons of another person or spiritual teacher[15]. Based on these criteria I argue that the lessons of *zhivotnaiia kniga* and *vechnaiia pamit* meet the conditions of the first point, given that there is a skill to both teaching these histories and to receiving them in a way that allows for understanding purpose and meaning; that the skill is tied to subsidiary awareness as described in the second point; and that, because the lessons are taught by group members who view each other as all equally divine, that subsidiary awareness is receptive to the connection of a common history and nurtured by a community of spiritual teachers. Therefore, I argue that Doukhobor religious tacit knowledge conveys their epistemology.

Mutual Aid

Although Peter Kropotkin wrote extensively on the topic of mutually beneficial cooperation between species, it was Karl Fedorovich Kessler, a German-Russian zoologist, who proposed the idea in 1880. In the introduction to his series of essays on mutual aid, Kropotkin writes of his own captivation when describing

> a lecture "On the Law of Mutual Aid," which was delivered at a Russian Congress of Naturalists, in January 1880, by the well-known zoologist, Professor Kessler, the then Dean of the St. Petersburg University, struck me as throwing a new light on the whole subject. Kessler's idea was, that besides the *law of Mutual Struggle* there is in Nature the *law of Mutual Aid*, which, for the success of the struggle for life, and especially for the

[15] Zigler, 167

> progressive evolution of the species, is far more important than the law of mutual contest. This suggestion—which was, in reality, nothing but a further development of the ideas expressed by Darwin himself in The Descent of Man—seemed to me so correct and of so great an importance, that since I became acquainted with it (in 1883) I began to collect materials for further developing the idea, which Kessler had only cursorily sketched in his lecture, but had not lived to develop.[16]

Kropotkin only disagreed with one aspect to Kessler's idea, and that was the view that animals engaged in mutually beneficial cooperation because of a "parental feeling." He argued against this, stating that "it is not love to my neighbour—whom I often do not know at all—which induces me to seize a pail of water and to rush towards his house when I see it on fire" but that it is a "far wider, even though more vague feeling or instinct of human solidarity and sociability which moves me. So it is also with animals"[17]. Kropotkin's series of essays on mutual aid was a direct response to the bastardization of Darwin's theory of evolution by Social Darwinists, notably Herbert Spencer. It was also a response to ideas stemming from Rousseau, Hobbes, and Malthusian concepts.

Charles Darwin originally used the term "natural selection" to describe the continuity of species; it was Herbert Spencer who introduced the term "survival of the fittest" in *Principles of Biology* (1864). Darwin's approach was concerned with biology and evolution, but Spencer applied Darwin's theory of evolution, this idea of "survival of the fittest," to areas such as economics, sociology, and politics. This idea came to be known as social Darwinism, and it not

[16] Kropotkin, Petr Alekseevich, and Anarchism Collection. *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. Rev. and Cheaper ed. London: W. Heinemann, 1904, x

[17] Kropotkin, xii

only contrasted rigidly with the theory of mutual aid later developed by Kessler and Kropotkin, but also with Darwin's own ideas on the matter. In *The Descent of Man* he wrote that

> however complex a manner this [sympathetic] feeling may have originated, as it is one of high importance to all those animals which aid and defend each other, it will have been increased, through natural selection; for those communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members, would flourish best and rear the greatest number of offspring.[18]

Social Darwinists ignored these statements made by Darwin, and Kropotkin criticized this heavily. Throughout his series of essays on mutual aid, Kropotkin used every chance he had to critique social Darwinists, and often directly called out Herbert Spencer. After writing about mutual aid amongst various classes of the animal kingdom, Kropotkin was determined to discuss the importance of the same factor in the evolution of people and their larger societies. He saw it as being more important and drew critical attention to the fact that there were "a number of evolutionists who may not refuse to admit the importance of mutual aid among animals, but who, like Herbert Spencer, will refuse to admit it for Man"[19].

Kropotkin wrote about the Reformation as not only a revolt against the Catholic Church, but also as a push towards free and united communities. He described how "those of the early writings and sermons of the period which found most response with the masses were imbued with ideas of the economical [sic] and social brotherhood of mankind"[20]. This is certainly true for early Anabaptist groups, such as the Swiss and Dutch Anabaptists and the Hutterites, as well

[18] Darwin, Charles. *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Princeton University Press, 2008. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/psu/detail.acti on?docID=581579, 82
[19] Kropotkin, xx
[20] Kropotkin, 225

as groups such as the Quakers and the True Levellers. The Protestant Reformation also swept through Eastern Europe with similar communal ideas arising. Groups such as the Strigolniki of the 14th century and the Molokans who evolved alongside the Doukhobors were critical of the Orthodox church and practiced communalism, pacifism, and rejection of baptism.

The origin of the Doukhobor's namesake is the essence of mutually beneficial cooperation. When Archbishop Amvrosii Serebrennikov used the word духоборы (*doukhobori*) in 1785 as an insulting means to describe a group of radical Christians, they took that name and applied it to themselves in solidarity with each other. Even though there have been multiple schisms with the group splitting into different Doukhobor factions, they all hold the central constant element, as described by Woodcock and Avakumovic, that is

> the belief in the imminence of God, and the presence within each man of the Christ spirit, which not merely renders priesthood unnecessary, since each man is his own priest in direct contact with the divine, but also makes the Bible obsolete, since every man can be guided, if only he will listen to it, by the voice within[21].

The lessons from the spiritually intuitive internal voice; the identity of acting *with* the spirit of God against any form of authoritative persecution; the oral history shared amongst themselves detailing their origins, triumphs, troubles, and prophesies; pacifism to the point of vegetarianism; these are just a handful of instances within Doukhobors existence that point to how mutual aid is a part of their spiritual tacit knowledge and becomes a unique part of their epistemology.

[21] Woodcock, 19

Conclusion

The relationship between Polanyi's concept of tacit knowledge and religion is a topic that is rarely explored and is done mostly within the realm of children's pedagogy. Although there is a part of this within Doukhobor epistemology, the community takes responsibility for teaching their history not only to their children but also amongst themselves. This communal and traditional way to share ways of knowing, including the things that are known but cannot be expressed, are not mutually exclusive to the Doukhobors; yet the contents of *zhivotnaiia kniga* and *vechnaiia pamit* contain unique tacit knowledge of how a Doukhobor understands themself and the world.

Their epistemology is orally conveyed through generations of psalms, songs, and stories that have been written across many generations and thousands of different people. Their view of God dwelling equally within each person results in limitless potential for who becomes a spiritual teacher and imparts knowledge. Their epistemology and tacit knowledge were almost pushed to the point of complete loss, but perseverance has maintained their way of spiritual teaching. Ryan Androsoff, a lifelong member of the Doukhobor community, and Dr. Ashleigh Androsoff, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Saskatchewan and member of the Doukhobor Society of Saskatoon, partnered together in recent years to create the Saskatchewan Doukhobor Living Book Project. Zigler writes that "as Polanyi suggested, tacit knowing and teaching are not only inseparable from a personal relation formed between a teacher and a student, they are also inseparable from a community and a tradition which sustains them"[22]. The practice of mutual aid within the Doukhobor community is amplified because it is part of their

[22] Zigler, 170

spiritual tacit knowledge and epistemology. This has driven their perseverance in maintaining the survival of their culture and spiritual beliefs.

Resources

Kropotkin, Petr Alekseevich, and Anarchism Collection. *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. Rev. and Cheaper ed. London: W. Heinemann, 1904.

Darwin, Charles. *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Princeton University Press, 2008. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/psu/detail.action?docID=581579. Created from PSU on 2021-05-06 20:24:41.

Polanyi, Michael, and Sen, Amartya. *The Tacit Dimension*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Polanyi, Michael. *The Tacit Dimension*. Doubleday Anchor Book; A540. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1967.

Polanyi, Michael. *The Study of Man*. Lindsay Memorial Lectures; 1958. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959.

Rak, Julie. *Negotiated Memory: Doukhobor Autobiographical Discourse*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004.

The Book of Life of the Doukhobors (The Living Book). 1978. Edited by Vladimir BonchBruevich. Translated by Victor O. Buyniak. Doukhobor Societies of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon and Blaine Lake: Blaine Lake. Originally published in 1954 as Zhivotnaia kniga Dukhobortsev. Winnipeg: Union of Doukhobors of Canada.

Wexler, Philip. *Holy Sparks: Social Theory, Education, and Religion*. 1st ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.

Woodcock, George, and Avakumovic, Ivan. *The Doukhobors*. Carleton Library; No. 108. Toronto : Ottawa: McClelland and Stewart ; Institute of Canadian Studies, Carleton University, 1977.

Zigler, Ronald Lee. "Tacit Knowledge and Spiritual Pedagogy." *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 20, no. 2 (1999): 162-72.