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Christian Meditation Groups As Communities

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Abstract

The paper presents findings from a survey focusing on meditation groups of Christian meditation, which are one of many types of spiritual communities in the Czech Republic. Christian Meditation is a contemplative prayer based on repetitive uttering of the mantra. This particular approach, which was developed by Benedictine monk John Main, is very different from the practices that were called meditation in the Christian culture in the past, but has on the other hand common features with some other approaches based on contemplative prayer, like the “Jesus prayer” and also with some forms of Asian spirituality. The goal of our research was to determine the most important characteristics of spiritual communities of Christian meditation of John Main. Research sub-questions were following: 1) what kind of relationships exist between members of these spiritual communities? 2) What relationship is between these groups and wider religious communities within which they exist? The findings show that there are certain benefits for community coming from this practice. Christian meditation is aimed primarily at building and strengthening of personal relationship with God. Still, meditation with others leads to greater benefits and deeper experience in comparison with being on one’s own. This contributes to the motivation to meet at regular (usually weekly) sessions, and during these emerges subtle sense of community. In this sense are meditation group beneficial for social capital of its members.

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1. Introduction

The paper presents findings from a survey focusing on meditation groups of Christian meditation, which are one of many types of spiritual communities in the Czech Republic. This type of groups are to be found in ever increasing numbers across many states of Western Europe and North America, and in various denominations. In the context of spiritual communities are Christian meditation groups among the more active and dynamically developing ones. They are open to members of all Christian churches and to the public in general.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Building of social capital in spiritual and religious communities

According to the programmatic statement “Global Agenda” social workers should use the methods of community work in their practice. One of very important partial goals of every community cooperation is boosting of social capital of the community. Social capital has been defined by Putnam (2000) as network of people sharing certain values and norms and willing to engage for the benefit of others. High level of social capital means that these networks link all elements of given community and strengthen its cohesion. The members are enabled to influence the conditions of their lives. On the other hand decline of social capital of communities leads to decrease in their ability to organize and act effectively in solving their problems (Putnam, 2000).

Spiritual communities are not exempt from the imperative to cultivate their social capital. Their involvement in the public life, when they defend their basic values, depend on social capital of their members, i.e. strong networks to people outside as well as inside the community. Community’s preparedness to act reflects willingness of its members to act collectively to achieve certain values in coordination with others. Religious communities in the Czech Republic are not in very good shape with respect to social capital, and hence the need to think about community work and its techniques to boost their social capital and with this their capacity to self-organize.

We see that the decline of social capital of religious communities is related to various causes. One of the most crucial is the situation where they stop to be communities of living faith. They then survive thanks to inertia, to existing social ties between their members, but they are no longer able to offer authentic religious experience to anybody seeking it. Without spiritual communities filling these larger religious communities with vibrant search for spiritual growth, their shared faith becomes unauthentic. Since every religious community is held together by shared faith, lack of this indicates erosion of social capital. Communities with only formal membership have only little ability to act in public to defend their values. Christian meditation groups seem to be proper actors in creating active, lively, spiritually seeking core of religious communities. In our research we tried to answer the question, to what degree is this really the case.

2.2. Christian meditation of John Main

After Second World War traditional churches lost some of their ability to attract members of young generation, but not everybody was completely secularized. The attraction of new religious

movements rose partly from the promise of the change of consciousness and an alternative to unauthentic, consumerist lifestyle; churches were apparently unable to offer neither intimate religious experience nor civic engagement (Berger, 1997; Küng & Stietencron, 1997; Štampach, 2010). These shifts affected in the end even the Christian churches: the sixties were characterized by resurgent fundamentalism as well as pentecostal movement (Lužný & Nešpor, 2007). New ideas and methods found their way into established churches: courses of meditation, open communities, promotion of spirituality, support to environmental ideas, vegetarianism, and other such things associated often with eastern religions (Heath & Potter, 2012; Štampach, 2010).

The quest for religious experience appeared in the sixties in many surprising disguises, from psychotherapeutic techniques aiming at liberation of body and its sexuality, psychedelics, to mystical methods from around the world. In the Christian context this religious experience is usually called mystical union with God. There are some spiritual methods leading to this union, and they sometimes resemble traditional eastern approaches. On this basis began to emerge meditation movements, offering similar experience as in eastern religious systems. These movements opened the possibility of developing intensive spiritual life to broader group of people, while in the past this was mostly reserved to monks and nuns.

In the following, we will describe shortly this method; we draw mostly on account by Laurence Freeman (2010). According to Laurence Freeman, who is currently the president of The World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM), it is contemplative prayer based on repetitive uttering of the mantra. This particular approach, which was developed by Benedictine monk John Main, is very different from the practices that were called meditation in the Christian culture in the past, but has on the other hand common features with some other approaches based on contemplative prayer, like the “Jesus prayer”. When we use the term Christian meditation or meditation in the following, we mean this method, unless noted otherwise.

Christian meditation, as it is taught and practiced in meditation groups and introductory courses held by the WCCM, stresses following aspects. A) First of all stands faith in God, it means that the primary goal and motivation for meditation should be the desire to be closer to Christ. B) Opening oneself to God means opening to him in the present. Hence meditation leads to being in the present moment, away from concerns with the past or future. If the mind of the meditating person is occupied by these, we can hardly say that she is with God. On the contrary, these concerns will soon arouse emotions. Such overloaded attention makes impossible to attain the stance of patient waiting for God, with complete openness. This aspect should be stressed during preparation for meditation as well as during closing reflection.

C) Christian meditation works also with the body and its posture. The body takes part in meditation; it becomes the temple for the prayer by heart. There is no particular prescribed position, but one should stay in one position during whole meditation. Good posture brings calm to the mind, helps to overcome disturbing thoughts. D) One should pay attention to the time and place for meditation. It is a ritual, personal or collective, and as such it needs regularity.

E) Most distinctive aspect of meditation is its use of prayer word, or mantra. This formula, usually just one word, is uttered in way typical for mantric meditation, in association with breath. In comparison with the mentioned Jesus prayer, Christian meditation does not place so much emphasis on invocation.

John Main suggests using the Aramaic words *maranatha*, meaning “Come, Lord!” (or “Our Lord has come”), and this is for two reasons. The first is that it can be easily accommodated with breath, the second that it is very unfamiliar word for most people in the West, and hence does not awake images in mind. Please replace this text with context of your paper.

3. Research Questions

Our research was guided by following questions:

1. What is the shape of these groups, how do they function within churches and within society?
2. Do meditation groups function as spiritual communities?
3. How does regular meeting of the group look like?
4. What relationships does the group have with broader religious community and with society in general?
5. Can meditation groups have some effect in handing the faith down to next generation or to people outside of the church?

4. Purpose of the Study

The goal of our research was to determine the most important characteristics of spiritual communities of Christian meditation of John Main. Research sub-questions were following: 1) what kind of relationships exist between members of these spiritual communities? 2) What relationship is between these groups and wider religious communities within which they exist? By this we want to find out if this form of spiritual activity is beneficial for community of parish and of the church as a whole. It is also possible to seek broader effects for society, but this is mostly beyond the limits of our study.

5. Research Methods

The research was based on qualitative methodology, and of the technique of semi-structured interviews. The reason for choosing qualitative approach is in relative novelty of this topic at least in Czech context, because this form of alternative spirituality was very little researched in the past. We also focused on this specific method of meditation, which has only few actively practicing groups in the Czech Republic, so it seemed appropriate to employ exploratory method and to cover this small population exhaustively and deeply.

The sample consisted of leaders of groups practicing Christian meditation. We contacted these groups using the contacts listed on the pages of Czech branch of WCCM. At the time of original research (spring 2014) there were 5 active groups, and leaders of all of them were willing to participate in the research. Later, new groups formed, of which we were able to include two (in summer 2016). The sample is small, but it covers all groups available in Czech Republic.

We decided to use semi-structured interview with a set of prepared questions or rather areas of interest we wanted to cover. Thus we obtained comparable data from all interviews, while allowing enough leeway for our participants to talk more deeply about topics of special interest to them. We

contacted each participant by phone and settled on the date of interview, which was then conducted in participant's home setting, usually in the same place where the meditation meetings take place. We obtained consent for recording the interviews, which lasted between 1 and 2 hours.

Data Analysis

Each recorded interview was transcribed for analysis. In our analysis we used only standard text editor. Text was coded according to our research questions and then similar expressions were coded and clustered together for interpretation. Coding was conducted inductively. We coded all the transcripts collaboratively, and compared our codes to reach maximal agreement. Further, interpretations were first developed independently and then read and assessed by the second researcher.

6. Findings

6.1. Basic characteristics of groups

We begin with description of basic features of the groups we analysed. We rely on information obtained by interviews, not by direct observation. However, if we take into account the fact that a) participants were both group leaders and founders, and b) the group history is short (up to five years), we can assume that this information is mostly valid.

All meditation groups are quite small. The numbers vary, but the number of active attendees never exceeded 7. Usually there are 3-5 active members. There are significant distinctions between groups by region, in which they function. They exist in two very different regions with respect to religiosity: in Brno (capital of south Moravia) and in north Bohemia. The latter is region with very low participation on religious life, on the other hand Brno is the centre of most religious (mostly Roman Catholic) region in Czech Republic. In the context of Czech Republic this means that regular religious participation is far from universal, but also church in part retained its traditional status in the community. In north Bohemian groups there was greater fluctuation of members, the active core consisted mostly of the priest, and other members were coming and leaving, sometimes there were people not belonging to the church at all. In Brno we saw greater cooperation between priest and active members, who were also active in the life of their parish or other such religious community. First of these "models" we labelled as missionary, while the second one as active core.

6.2. Meditation groups as small religious communities

Now we can proceed to the question, what is the most appropriate characterization of meditation groups, and we propose that they are spiritual communities. The reasons will be made obvious in the following. The motivation that brings them into existence and maintains them is in sharing of common spiritual way and practice, with the goal of complete openness to God and working of His Spirit. As one participant said, it is a community of "pilgrims walking in the same direction". There is little beside this kind of community, we cannot talk about club, association or any other form of formal organization, which will be quite counterproductive.

The main force is the need to share spiritual way, and this is strengthened by the experience mentioned by majority of informants that meditating with others brings stronger effects of meditation. We

cannot identify some clear factor behind this effect, but the fact is that practicing with others leads to deeper experience of contact with the sacred.

6.3. Relationships within community

Participants express certain doubts and distance to understanding communities as a social gathering. Meditation groups meet to be together in silence and in spiritual effort, not in order to socialize. Ties between members are formed by this specific activity. One our informant observed that there emerge special relationships within meditation community, because “it is very intimate to be silent and meditate together”.

Intensive personal ties between members of community are, however, common. These can meet in the meditation group as well as elsewhere, but usually the latter is the case. We can say that personal ties of members reflect mostly their relationships outside the meditation groups. Meditation meeting do not develop them very much.

6.4. The meeting of spiritual community

Meetings of meditation groups are centred on mantric meditation. There is also some form of verbal interaction present. The topics of such discussion are rather narrow and focused on themes related to Christian meditation.

The meeting is usually introduced by reading of some suitable text to prepare members for meditation. Then first of these topics is reflection on meditation exercise. This is sometimes understood as a tool of greater development of meditation skills and thus of spiritual growth. It also motivates to further meditation. Others describe this more as a spontaneous habit, but nobody is against it. There was only one exception to this: in one group there is the rule not to reflect on meditation, since this could lead to evaluation of spiritual growth of individual members of the group, and thus the most important purpose of meditation, i.e. to be with God and open to him, will be lost. In other words, it will become only one of ways of personal development.

Other discussions after the meditation is over are about Christian mystic texts. First of these is John Main, but also Anthony de Mello or Anselm Grün. Either the members reflect on the text that was read before meditation, or the reading itself takes place only after meditation. Other discussion topics are not present at all in groups.

6.5. Relationships of meditation groups to their wider religious communities

All groups in which we conducted interviews function within larger religious communities and with their support. These communities provide them rooms to meet, and occasionally some other support. But there is a question if there could be some tension between meditation groups and the rest of religious community. This question is based on our perception that Christian meditation might look like certain types of eastern spirituality and thus might be suspicious, and it is attended also by people not belonging to church.

None of the groups involved confirmed this hypothesis. Even if Main’s Christian meditation is still rather new phenomenon in Czech religious life, it is accepted by other members of churches. One of the

reasons could be that many Christians already know the books by Anthony de Mello or Anselm Grün and other similar authors, who might be considered as “bridge between the East and the West”, by words of one our informant, because they introduced some ideas and ways of eastern spirituality in a manner that is acceptable in our context.

Of importance is also the “personal union” between meditation group and the religious community as a whole, because the priest is in all cases the leader of both the group and the parish, and regular meditators are often also active in the parish.

There are also irregular attendees of meditation. Some members of church occasionally come to meditation group, and one informant commented on this with slight irony that “some of these think about it like that I did miss the Sunday service, so I go at least to meditation meeting, while for others it is one more activity to bring us together”. There is definitely a network of relationships between the meditation group and other members of religious community allowing us to say that these groups are organically connected with wider religious community, accepted by other members.

According to one informant, the religious life within the church has been enhanced since the group is meeting. More specifically this means deeper experience of Sunday service and other liturgical rites, not only among group members, but also in the wider community. It is, however, hard to verify this claim that deeper spiritual life of few members might somehow influence overall religious life.

6.6. Meditation groups and handing the faith down

In meditation groups might be suitable environment to hand down the faith to people outside of church and to next generations. This is mostly thanks to the nature of the groups, which are grounded in their parishes, but at the same time programmatically open to “outsiders”. The form of meetings is easy to learn and get used to, especially for people unused to liturgy and other aspects of church life. Occasionally informants mentioned that some people entered the church via the meditation group; this was, however, the case only in more secularized regions of the state.

7. Conclusion

In this article we studied a particular form of Christian spiritual practice, the Christian meditation introduced by John Main. We focused especially on effects this practice has on community life within the group and in wider religious community. The topic of research is important because in such post-traditional types of association may be found the source of life energy for Christian churches and also for associational life of the society in general.

The findings show that there are certain benefits for community coming from this practice. These are, however, not straightforward. Christian meditation is not aimed at building and strengthening of social ties, but rather on personal relationship with God. The collective aspect of this practice is also not necessary, one may meditate on her own as well. Still, meditation with others leads to greater benefits and deeper experience in comparison with being on one’s own. This contributes to the motivation to meet at regular (usually weekly) sessions, and during these emerges subtle sense of community. It is not strong, because the nature of the meeting does not support it, but there is certainly visible direction, and people who attended some longer meeting dedicated to meditation (e.g. one week long) describe very strong

feeling of “belonging together”. From this arises also stronger community in the parish as a whole. Christian meditation is not the sole model of community work with religious and spiritual communities. It is nevertheless certainly one of very interesting answers to Global Agenda’s demand that social workers should promote also the right of citizens to spiritual development within the context of their own traditions.

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