

'I try not to save my soul, but to understand it'

Young adults from Finland, Poland and Russia on a spiritual quest

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This article presents a comparative study of the experiences of young adults on a spiritual quest in cultural and religious contexts where they have not yet been properly studied, that is Lutheran Finland, Roman Catholic Poland and Orthodox Russia. The study seeks to contribute to the further refinement of the concept of spiritual quest in order to enhance its utility and applicability across different cultural and religious contexts. The analysis revealed several aspects inherent in spiritual quest but which can be variously experienced and manifested in different constellations. This article shows that although each individual might deliver their own logic of 'being on a quest', separate cases can be compared on the basis of the concept of the seekership habitus, as presented in this study. The chosen framework of individualization on the one hand and the concept of seekership habitus on the other helps to reveal the duality of the phenomenon of spiritual quest, which is somewhat overlooked in scholarly debates on the topic.

Introduction

In recent decades, the sociology of religion has produced a substantial amount of research on 'spiritual quest' (Roof 1993, 1999; Wuthnow 1998; Warburg 2011; Sutcliffe 2017). This research has been rooted in the premise that the phenomenon of spiritual quest (or seeking) has risen largely as a result of the constantly expanding array of 'options in matters of belief, life-path, or "spirituality"' which

have proliferated in the wake of long-term institutional Christian decline (McLeod 2007: 265). Despite concerning the Western Christian world in general, up to this point scholarship on spiritual quest has principally remained rooted in the Anglo-Saxon contexts where it originated. The importance of further study of the ways in which 'being in quest . . . is set within, informed by, and even altered by relational environments' has already been raised (Graham *et al.* 2008: 160–1), yet a comparative perspective has been absent from earlier research.

Although spiritual quest has become one of the topics for discussion in the Western sociology of religion dating back to the 1960s, precisely in religion vs spirituality debates, scholars tend to overlook some important nuances of the phenomenon of spiritual quest. For instance, its often subduing force and distressing character that is sometimes also accompanied by feelings of loneliness. In this article I take a wider perspective of individualization in order to highlight what I refer to as the binaries of the concept of spiritual quest with the aim of improving its functionality as a heuristic category and analytical concept. Moreover, in a deliberate effort to broaden the scope of non-religious sociological research in the area, this article

explores the quest phenomenon in the contexts of Northern and Eastern Europe. The present study suggests a comparative perspective by examining the experience of individual accounts of 'being in quest' narrated by young adults (aged 18–30) from three countries with quite specific and diverging religious contexts: Finland (Lutheran), Poland (Roman Catholic) and Russia (Orthodox). The choice of these locations allows for cross-contextual comparisons between some of the main conceptual categories commonly employed in individuals' accounts of 'being in quest' in these respective contexts. Thereby, this article aims to contribute to the further refinement of the concept of 'being in quest' in order to enhance its utility and applicability in sociological research across different cultural and religious contexts.

This article is based on the international mixed-methods research project 'Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective' (YARG 2015–19), which explored the values and religious subjectivities of young adult university students in thirteen countries around the world. The rich and extensive empirical data gathered by the project's international team of researchers (including the author) opens up several new avenues for the exploration of present-day individualized outlooks (both religious and non-religious) in different parts of the world, including the phenomenon of spiritual quest.

The first part of the article provides a brief overview of previous sociological research on individualism and spiritual quest. The second part describes the methodology and data of the YARG project. The third part provides a context-informed analysis of individual interviews with young adults in Finland, Poland and Russia. It concludes with a discussion offering several binaries of analytical categories

for the sociological study of spiritual quest and a cross-contextual comparison of the accounts provided by selected interviewees.

Previous research

The concept of 'spiritual quest' was introduced in the Western sociology of religion in the second half of the twentieth century as scholars began to view changes in the Western religious field within a broader framework of individualization (e.g. Luckmann 1967; Taylor 1989). In an increasingly individualized social and cultural environment, spiritual quest becomes ever more closely connected with a growing emphasis on personal autonomy and the cultivation of unique selves. As follows from the widely acknowledged theory of Thomas Luckmann (1967), 'the modern quest for salvation and personal meaning' belongs to the sphere of the self, while, according to another prominent sociologist of religion, José Casanova, "self-expression" and "self-realization" become the "invisible religion" of modernity' (Casanova 1992: 34–5). The phenomenon of spiritual quest clearly fits into a continuous historical process of the gradual 'interiorization' of religion since the Reformation and then the Enlightenment. In particular, spiritual quest is reflective of a broader cultural emphasis on the development and cultivation of 'self-awareness', as genealogical studies on individualism have demonstrated (Dumont 1992; Gurevich 1995). In this regard, the phenomenon of spiritual quest transcends specific debates in the sociology of religion and opens up fruitful connections with other research fields. For these reasons, and for the sake of charting the contours of a more nuanced approach to this phenomenon, it is important to consider the disposition of 'spiritual quest' within a wider framework of individualization. Viewing spiritual quest from this

perspective also opens up its duality somewhat beyond the agenda of religious studies. In what follows I therefore highlight some aspects from the research focused on individualism that need to be taken into account in relation to the spiritual quest.

In their extensive and widely read *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and colleagues (1985) revealed the ambivalence of American individualism, arguing that it tends to provoke a 'mixture of admiration and anxiety' (p. viii). According to their findings, personal freedom and detachment from social commitments often went hand in hand with a notable degree of social disembeddedness, a sense of extreme otherness and loneliness. These tendencies, they went on to argue, make it hard for individuals to accept the monopoly on truth claimed by traditional religions (Fuller 2001: 100). Anthony Giddens has also famously pointed out radical doubt as being one of late modernity's central traits. This, he argues is 'existentially troubling for ordinary individuals' (Giddens 1991: 21) because self-determination in late modernity 'has to be reflexively made' (p. 3) and thus takes the form of a challenge that is often accompanied by frustration. Similar themes have also been explored by influential social theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman and Ulrich Beck. In particular, as they have highlighted, modern individuals have become 'individuals-by-fate' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2003: 5). The 'requirement' or 'expectation' that everyone should choose and decide on their beliefs on their own (as well as in a responsible way) causes individual anxiety and desolation (Rosati 2009: 26). From this perspective, 'individualist spirituality' might appear as a 'cultural sedative providing individual rapture' while simultaneously reinforcing 'the very problems that many of its advocates seek to overcome' (Carrette and King 2005: 77).

In this view, individuals have no choice left other than to find their own way, so the idea of individual freedom, in this sense, is rather misleading. All these aspects should be taken into account when considering the phenomenon of spiritual quest.

The concept of spiritual quest was initially introduced by Wade Clark Roof (1993, 1999) and Robert Wuthnow (1998) to capture the changing religious sensibilities of the US baby boomer generation. Both scholars presented a rather positive view on *a personal quest for meaning* (of inner life and the outer world, immanent and transcendent) as a peculiar type of disposition among people born in the 1940s to 1960s in the USA that was subsequently passed on to succeeding generations. The increasingly prevalent 'spiritual seeking' mode they identified contrasted notably with what they termed 'dwelling spirituality' through its much stronger emphasis on personal freedom and its abandonment of the very idea of absolute truth in favour of a more empowering and emancipating individual practical wisdom (Fuller 2001: 154). Spiritual 'dwellers' or 'seekers' are, however, certain kinds of *habitus* rather than categories of *people*. Hence, there is no absolute distinction between 'dweller' and 'seeker', insofar as 'many dwellers are seeking for spiritual enrichment, both within and outside their home church, no less than the seekers without affiliation to a church' (Hellemans and Jonkers 2015: 6).

Spiritual quest is directly associated with the process of seeking (or searching) for one's own sense of spirituality, meaning in life, or truth. The person who finds herself or himself in this process is considered a seeker, even if they do not apply this particular self-identification to themselves. As Steven Sutcliffe puts it, 'identification as a seeker requires a measure of conscious and rational decision-making' (Sutcliffe 2017:

44) which means, among other things, that people do not necessarily claim they are seekers even though they are on a spiritual quest.

On the basis of previous research in this particular area, this study departs from the assumption that the disposition of 'spiritual quest' is relatively common and widespread in contemporary Western cultural contexts, but in a plural rather than a universal sense. This is to say that individuals experience their own 'being in quest' in various ways depending on their personal life stories and the vocabularies available to them in their own social, cultural and religious contexts. Consequently, subjective experiences of being in spiritual quest can be very diverse. There are, however, certain traits that unite these experiences. Following Sutcliffe's subsequent revision of the concept of spiritual quest, I consider the quest process as being set within a so-called *seekership habitus* (Sutcliffe 2017). This perspective therefore presumes that there are certain values, behavioural patterns and preferences that constitute a seekership habitus. The seekership habitus is consequently understood as a structuring structure that determines the particular ways in which the process of 'being in quest' unfolds in each individual case. The concepts of 'quest' and 'seekership' are therefore not used interchangeably. Rather, I use the latter to refer to Sutcliffe's conception only. The distinction between them is mainly one of viewpoint: whereas 'quest' refers to a broader phenomenon, 'seekership' refers to an individual, and thus concrete and empirical, manifestation of that phenomenon. However, since Sutcliffe's concept of 'seekership habitus' remains rather unspecified, further empirical exploration is called for. This article aims to take a significant step in this direction by (1) identifying the principal traits of a seekership habitus on a largely theoretical

level, and (2) then applying these as part of an empirical exploration of individuals who seem to fit into this seekership habitus.

At this point I suggest several traits of a seekership habitus. Above all, it is associated with reason and authenticity. Usually, a quest-like disposition arises out of a feeling of doubt and the determination to deal with existential questions in a conscious way. Sometimes a spiritual quest is merely about finding the 'path' or 'truth that would guide' individual lives (Ammerman 2013: 269). At the same time, seekers (i.e. individuals engaged in a spiritual quest) tend to display a heightened sensitivity towards the intellectual inconsistency of religious traditions which pushes them to engage actively with various philosophical outlooks (Fuller 2001: 76), which causes constant re-assessment of obtained knowledge, familiar judgements and accepted values (Graham *et al.* 2008: 148). Thus, it is also common for spiritual seekers to remain open to multiple authorities from various traditions of beliefs and practices even across the conceptual 'religious-secular' divide (Sutcliffe 2017: 34). Ultimately, a 'quest has no identifiable essence other than its own inner revelations, bound not by cultural conformity but focused around one central ideal – being true to oneself' (Roof 1999: 67), that is to remain authentic on one's individual life path.

Methodology and data

As noted, this study is based on the findings of the international research project 'Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective' (YARG 2015–19). This mixed-method research venture aimed to explore the values and religious subjectivities of young adults (born in the 1990s) in thirteen different countries around the world: Canada, China, Finland, Ghana, India, Israel (three separate cases), Japan, Peru,

Poland, Russia, Sweden, Turkey and the United States. Both quantitative and qualitative research instruments were applied: a general survey with the Schwartz Portrait Values Questionnaire (minimum N=300/country, total sample N=4964) was followed by series of semi-structured thematic interviews along with the Faith Q-Sort (FQS) – an instrument specifically developed for the study of contemporary religious subjectivities (minimum N=45/country). The survey was distributed in paper or digital form among young adults (aged 18–30) via universities across thirteen countries in 2016. In conjunction with the survey, all participants were invited to take part in the interview and FQS part of the study on a voluntary basis. From those who expressed willingness, a smaller sample (as heterogeneous as possible) was formed in each country-case (with the exception of Japan).

While extensive, the sample therefore does not allow us to make broader generalizations about the views of young adults in common. Rather, ‘notwithstanding significant differences across different countries and socio-cultural contexts, university students tend to inhabit a cultural world that differs considerably from their non-university student peers’ (Moberg *et al.* 2019: 244).

As a research instrument, the FQS¹ was initially designed by the psychologist of religion David Wulff and further developed by the YARG core research team (Wulff 2019; Nynäs *et al.* forthcoming). The FQS consists of 101 statements that, taken together, aim to capture the wider range of viewpoints that people may hold on various religion-related topics and

themes. In practice, the statements, formulated by researchers and printed on separate cards, must be distributed on a layout according to participants’ perception of how well or poorly each of them describes herself/himself. Through factor analysis of the completed sortings, shared patterns of rank order are revealed (Watts and Stenner 2012: 70). These patterns exemplify the wider range of both shared and contrasting ways in which particular groups of participants position themselves in relation to the phenomena under study, that is what and how is being said (Kontala 2016: 79). The FQS part was coupled with thematic interviews, which provided researchers with an opportunity to ask participants more specific questions about their sorting of the statements.

In this study I use interview data (including FQS) to provide a comparative perspective on the individual experiences of spiritual quest as narrated by young people from Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox environments. All accessible (i.e. translated) transcripts from each country sample went through initial coding procedures. Across all interviews I also examined in what cases and what in particular was said about two statements from the FQS that explicitly convey or articulate a ‘quest’ notion: ‘Views religious faith as a never-ending quest’ (no. 13) and ‘Centers his or her life on a religious or spiritual quest’ (no. 64). The FQS was originally constructed in English. Prior to its actual implementation across the different national contexts included in the project, all statements were translated into national languages (including Finnish, Russian and Polish) by means of a thorough double back-and-forward translation process that aimed to achieve equivalence of meaning rather than verbatim translation. With regard to the Finnish, Russian and Polish translations, it is thus worth noting

1 For a more detailed discussion of the research methodology and Faith-Q-Sort in particular, see Nynäs *et al.* (forthcoming).

that Finnish uses the same root-word for both 'seeker' (*etsijä*) and 'quest' (*etsintä*). In Russian '(spiritual) quest' is translated as *духовный поиск* and *духовные искания*, which are both based on the same root-word. The same applies in Polish, which uses the word *poszukiwanie* (*duchowe*) in both cases. Most of the interviews were conducted in local languages, then transcribed, and finally translated to English. For this study, I used the English translation versions of the interviews. In total I analysed the complete interview samples from Russia and Finland (forty-five transcripts from each context) and twenty-four Polish interviews that have been translated into English.

Based on further coding the total number of analysed interviews was then reduced to eleven from the Russian, seven from the Polish, and twelve from the Finnish samples. As a final stage, I selected those interviews which included the most evident and clearly articulated references to personal experiences of a spiritual quest. The aim of the analysis is therefore not to achieve any kind of broader representativeness, but rather to highlight some of the main narratives and binaries of 'quest' that serve to nuance previous scholarly understandings of that concept. The following analysis therefore focuses on a limited number of illustrative interviews from each national context.

Analysis

In this part I present three country cases by providing an overview of each context and two interviewees' accounts of 'being in quest' followed by interpretations.

Finland

Over the past two to three decades, the Finnish religious world has generally become increasingly individualized and

privatized (Ketola 2007). The most remarkable development in the Finnish religious scene in the past decade, however, is the exponential increase in people who lack a religious affiliation altogether (Broo *et al.* 2021; Nynäs *et al.* 2015). The generation of today's young adults no longer follows the common Nordic 'believing in belonging' pattern of religious identification as millennials make up the larger portion of those who have recently left the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Niemelä 2015). Notably, a ten-year-long follow-up study points to the fact that leaving the church for Finnish young adults represents 'an act of authenticity in which they follow their own true selves' (p. 173). As several studies have demonstrated, young Finns have become increasingly self-reflexive with regards to their religious views and engagements in ways that are generally reflective of a culture of individualism that downplays the role and importance of collective identities (e.g. Ranta *et al.* 2016: 49).

Kaisa,² a female junior theology student (b. 1991), begins by saying that she does not 'have very strong views or thoughts about this being true and that being not true', which makes it hard for her to take a stand on different statements such as those contained in the FQS. At present, she does not identify with religion in any form. Despite her religious upbringing, Kaisa left the Lutheran Church at the age of eighteen after experiencing a 'guilty conscience' for not being 'good enough' for God. Since then she has abandoned the idea 'that there's someone who follows me or watches over me' and considers her distancing from religion a 'liberating experience'. She describes religious traditions as 'vague' and hard to

2 All the following personal names from interviews are aliases.

grasp. Rather than trying to make sense of them, she instead tries 'to focus more on treating my fellow human beings with dignity'. She does, however, talk about her 'spirituality', which she describes in 'practical' terms as having 'a balanced feeling about myself and my surroundings'. At the same time, she points out that 'a great deal of texts or thinkers from religious traditions touch and move me. And at times I get this desire to have some kind of zeal, that I would believe in something'. Kaisa has already 'searched for my own worldview' for a while and at times 'I've seen that nature is god or that divinity resides in nature ... Like is it divinity or is it that life just exists, that it alone is this miraculous'. Paradoxically, as she openly admits, 'I do apparently have a yearning for the day that I would have some kind of community around me or that life would be so easy that there would be some organization or worldview saying this is how things are or that this is how you find peace and then I like keep shuffling between them'.

Like many of her peers, Kaisa left the Lutheran Church because of personal disagreement and doubts that foreshadowed her switching to a seeking mode. She seems to be moved emotionally towards searching for personal *faith* rather than for absolute *truth*. Kaisa's way of 'being in quest' is characterized by an openness towards a variety of meanings from multiple sources, coupled with an eagerness to embrace them. This is linked to a desire to find a community of like-minded people where she sees further potential for self-realization. The *relational* focus in this approach to 'being in quest' contrasts sharply with the account of another interviewee, to which we now turn.

Janne (b. 1991) is studying at university to become a teacher of history and had resigned from the Lutheran Church

only two weeks prior to the interview. He explains, 'it was pretty much just because I felt that I'm not a part of it', having a sense of religion which is 'not a traditional one' and not 'according to the norm'. Nevertheless, Janne feels 'a religious side' in himself. Religion is 'at least to me sort of a really personal thing' and the decision to distance himself from the religious community 'comes from me having questioned these things from really early on'. In his view, 'it's wrong that you should live according to a norm or some norms or that because someone says that's how it is'. He posits that 'everyone can have totally different meanings and impressions' of the same things. Thus, the FQS-statement 'Views religious faith as a never-ending quest' reflects his view of faith as something that 'changes all the time'. This young man also enjoys talking about his convictions, including religious ones, with close friends. He recognizes, however, that even though 'there isn't any absolute knowledge', this does not bother him. Now he sticks to believing 'in a kind of absolute good or like a purposefulness' and practices meditation which he finds 'beneficial'. This, he says, helps to 'structure my thinking' and functions as a way of 'establishing connection with myself'. He continues, 'My meditating does also include wishing, but I don't really gear it towards anything ... If I know something big is coming up that affects me then I might make a wish that everything goes well ... It may focus on something, or it doesn't focus on anything.'

This account reflects a generally questioning attitude, being open to changing one's mind and revising one's views, not relying on any particular authorities. The acknowledgement of the absence of absolute knowledge or ultimate truth goes along with an appreciation of personal reasoning. This stance, therefore, highlights the

importance of thinking for oneself and remaining authentic towards oneself. In this case, this also appears to go together with an unwillingness to attach oneself to the established religious institution (the Lutheran church). Thus, a detachment from church for the sake of being true to oneself logically turns into a quest for a subjectively reasonable meaning of life. Trying out spiritual practices like meditation (though in a manner unconnected to strict conceptions or traditions) becomes part of this process. While the previous story by Kaisa links possibilities for self-realization with a community of like-minded people that she would like to find (a 'relational' approach), Janne's quest is directed towards concrete *means* of self-enhancement which are deemed useful in dealing with personal matters. This approach appears as 'pragmatic' in comparison to Kaisa's community-oriented quest.

Poland

Poland has been characterized for decades by its persistently high degree of religious vitality. Since the 1989 democratic revolution, however, the religious sensibilities of Poles have been moving progressively in a more de-institutionalized and individualized direction (Grabowska 2017: 260). These tendencies can also be seen in the religious patterns of younger generations, who now enjoy a large variety of activities and worldviews to choose from as alternatives to church attendance and adherence to the Catholic tradition (Carlton 2015: 47). As numerous scholars have pointed out, fewer and fewer parents nowadays actively transmit a religion-inspired lifestyle to their children (e.g. Mandes and Rogaczewska 2013). Religious, moral and existential concerns are rarely discussed between family members, who are becoming more distant from each other in their behaviour patterns and perceptions of eth-

ical and sacred matters (Borowik 2017: 191). Nevertheless, the numbers of Poles who identify as atheists or adhere to other traditions than Catholicism remain low (Carlton 2015: 41). Moreover, previous studies have also revealed that the minority distant from church often stick to religious (and precisely Catholic) beliefs such as faith in a deity and afterlife even if they espouse negative attitudes towards institutionalized religion (Tyrła 2018: 141). This suggests a broader turn towards individual and privatized religious sensibilities in Poland.

Stefan was born in 1992 and raised by his grandparents, and was studying philosophy and philology at university when interviewed. To begin with, he explains that his views are 'not so much determined' and describes his present condition as: 'I left the harbour and I do not know where I am sailing to'. Belonging to a religious family and previously acting as an altar boy in a Catholic parish for five years, he now describes himself as 'standing in face of indeterminacy'. Not 'a rebel child', Stefan describes his current stance in terms of 'minimal affirmation combined with a critical attitude if necessary'. He completely agrees with the FQS-statement 'Views religious faith as a never-ending quest' and admits that he 'cannot give up an idea of living in this manner' even if it means 'somehow wasting my life on such a search'. He finds himself searching for a path 'within Christianity'. He does not have a detached or 'universal view', nor is he looking for any alternative traditions. This philosophy student views Christianity as 'so comprehensive that it can [be put] – a bit phenomenologically: a reservoir of meaning in which you can dig and dig – until you find your own way'. To Stefan's mind, while creating a 'religious patchwork choosing what is most pleasant' would make life easier,

he is instead searching for 'at least a feeling that objective truth can exist'. Longing for a deeper faith is essential to Stefan and he usually feels sad when encountering people who deny religion as such and ignore existential issues and 'the importance of questions concerning meaning'. Nevertheless, he makes friends with people of different outlooks: 'both believers and non-believers ... militant atheists and agnostics'. He prefers to meet people 'unsparing in criticism' and 'to learn about opposite contents or views', which he sometimes experiences as 'tormenting', because it makes him hesitant about his own personal convictions. These kinds of interactions lead Stefan to feel he 'succumbed to this storm' of diversity that, on the one hand, testifies to his openness to alternatives, while, on the other hand, also reveals the vulnerability of his own position. Talking about the future, Stefan vows that he wants 'to calm my search a bit' and harden his core views: 'I would like just to know that I will find something that will convince me, something I would give much for. But it is not yet the case.'

Like many young Poles today, Stefan is quite critical of the religious tradition he was raised in. He constantly encounters a variety of religious and spiritual views and responds to them. Although discussions and disputes on significant matters may confuse him, Stefan nevertheless sees these as necessary for testing his own ideas, which forms an important part of his personal quest. Doubt, not knowing and uncertainty are at the core of his experience of a quest and which efficiently stimulates his mind into looking for reasonable arguments for particular issues. This spurs a movement towards authenticity, that is finding his 'own way'. In this case, quest appears as an *active* self-sufficient process which is worth a lifetime of pursuit or even as something inseparable from being alive.

This articulation of 'being in quest' sounds encouraging as it positively links the notion of quest with an aspiration toward self-realization. By contrast, another participant from Poland articulated quite a frustrating view on quest.

Tomasz, a male philosophy student born in 1990 and coming from a small industrial town, strongly identifies with the FQS-statement 'Views religious faith as a never-ending quest'. For him, finding himself in a quest feels like 'getting lost', lacking convictions and being permanently in doubt. This situation is reinforced by the fact that his family never gave answers to existential questions he might have had, but rather caused 'existential uncertainty'. The young Pole sees himself as being 'just thrown into' the requirement to choose what to believe in, and that is not what he would have wished for himself. Longing to find a community of people that represent 'certainty of values', Tomasz approached Catholicism in primary school, but his devotion later turned into a disappointment with the church. Over time, he gradually lost his faith too. Tomasz recognizes himself as having a 'vague and shifting religious outlook' (direct quotation from the FQS statement). His views are neither 'crystallized' nor 'sufficiently clear', which deters him from civil or political engagements as well as from religious commitments; 'because I need to find my way to them myself and sort many things out'. At the same time, he sticks to science as his 'main religious system', thinking that 'everything is based on faith, including science'. In this way, he rejects the possibility of 'access to any truths as such' but, nevertheless, finds the exact sciences 'tempting' to engage with. For Tomasz the experience of individual freedom appears frustrating and his spiritual quest seems to be forced rather than preferred: 'I don't know who I am and

what I'm doing and what I should do, I'd like to be someone who knows.' This search is aimed at completeness, which means finding space for self-realization and ways to express his own personal inclinations. Contacts with others and mutual understanding are also desired. In the future, Tomasz hopes that everything will start 'to sort out' and 'fall into place'.

In contrast to the previous accounts, for Tomasz, 'being in quest' is perceived not as a personal choice, but rather as a forced situation, although his starting point remains the same: an inherent unease regarding existential issues and a great deal of uncertainty. His reflective reasoning does its job by rejecting the idea of an objective truth. At the same time it also stimulates him to question certain truth claims, particular sets of ideas and potential identifications. For Tomasz, the fact that nothing is convincing enough and that everything can be questioned or disputed causes him frustration and distress. Not being able to determine his own outlook with confidence, he experiences quest as a challenging trap which is hard to grapple with. In his case, quest appears as something discouraging, because it makes a person feel 'lost', and denies any solid ground on which to build up his worldview.

Russia

Individuals born in the 1990s are the first generation in Russia to grow up under a new state regime that accepts religious freedom (although with some reservations³). From an early age young Russians are witnessing functioning religious institutions, though more often from the out-

side than within.⁴ Owing to a long-lasting break in the Christian Orthodox tradition as a consequence of the forced secularization of earlier generations during Soviet times, young people are nowadays rarely introduced to religion through their families and seldom turn to their older relatives for guidance in religious and spiritual matters (Froese 2004). Although early baptism has become more common in the past couple of decades, only a small portion of baptized youngsters have received a proper religious socialization, the lack of which, as is widely known, significantly decreases the probability of religious identification in adulthood (Prutskova 2015). According to recent research, the inter-generational transmission of religious beliefs, practices and especially identities rarely happens in Russian families (see Vrublevskaya *et al.* 2019). Taken together, these circumstances leave a space free for self-determination, where young people often independently construct their own outlooks on the basis of a variety of sometimes divergent sources and traditions, both Soviet and Christian.

Alyona, a female student of history, was born in 1994 and has always lived in Moscow. During the interview, she immediately outlines the confusion she is currently going through in her life. On the one hand, she acknowledges the impact of her closest family who 'truly believe in God', but on the other hand, she 'can't make head or tail of' her own believing in God and is 'still not sure' whether she trusts the religious tradition of her people, that is Russian Orthodox Christianity. Instantly she positions herself

3 For example, the Pussy Riot case and the persecution of minority religious groups (Jehovah Witnesses) (Uzlaner 2014).

4 In fact, not many can engage extensively in Russian Orthodox Church institutions because of the extremely low number of clergy and the very limited time they are able to devote to religious communication with lay people (Emel'yanov 2017).

in a quest: 'I can't say I've stopped adhering to Orthodox beliefs. Rather, I'm in a search now; that is, I'm trying to figure out whether it's the truth or not.' The FQS-statement 'Views religious faith as a never-ending quest' corresponds with her views, as she perceives 'being in quest' as 'the purpose of our life'. In contrast, belonging to a particular religion, in Alyona's eyes, eliminates the possibilities for a quest because 'a religious person has specific beliefs that keep him or her grounded'. At present, she enjoys 'being in search of something true', 'in a creative quest' and would like to 'reach peace of mind eventually', closer to life's end. She is fascinated with the idea of 'finding yourself' by 'determining your own qualities and ambitions' which she links to 'Buddhism and Hinduism', in contrast to 'Christianity and Islam', which focus on 'salvation of the soul'. Now, Alyona says, 'I try not to save my soul, but to understand what my soul is like, who I am, and who I can become. And what path I should take. Well, basically, the path you take depends on your desires. However, it takes a while to figure out what you actually desire [laughing]'. It seems to her that she will 'always be in this quest', which she sees as a process of achieving 'certain results' on the way while always keeping on the move. She can imagine 'finding peace of mind', which signifies, however, the end of life, because 'you're not really living when you're at peace'. The notion of peace understood 'as if I don't have any ambitions left' does not appeal to this young female student in the current stage of her life.

This account serves as a good illustration of the current situation in Russia: first, there is a growing awareness and recognition of different religious and spiritual traditions and, second, there is an increasing emphasis on individual freedom in matters of faith and moral concerns. In her seeking,

Alyona is driven by uncertainty in what to believe in combined with a highly reflexive attitude. At the core of this quest lies an intellectual, rational aspect best reflected in a wish to *understand* oneself: one's own 'nature' (a soul) and desires. Alyona takes a rational stance towards existential issues and expresses a clear intention to tackle them in a highly personal manner. Her quest is oriented mostly towards the *inner self* and focuses on cultivating her own authenticity. Alyona's way of 'being in quest' has much in common with that of the next interviewee, although their attitudes towards the self are slightly different.

Gleb, a man born in 1996 in a small town in the Volga federal district, moved to Moscow to study political science. He is concerned about 'determining what the truth is' that makes 'the entire life' into 'a never-ending quest'. He agrees with the FQS-statement 'Views religious faith as a never-ending quest', but personally does not connect his being in quest either to religion or to spirituality. Rather, 'it'll be linked to the fact that I'm in a permanent quest and can – sometimes – change my opinion ... I'm often changeable about certain matters'. Nevertheless, Gleb is convinced that 'it's important to form a definite outlook' and to live in accordance with particular 'life principles'. That, at least, would be 'much easier'. Having 'a certain meaningful line in life – it's really important, right'. Accordingly, the young man has an idea of a life-path to follow and has 'ambitions of achieving the goal', although he sometimes lacks the inner resources to fulfil his 'life ideal' and reverts to blaming, scorning and feeling pity for himself. He recognizes that he fails from time to time and is unsuccessful in his personal achievements: 'I don't follow this ideal in the long-term perspective, why? Because I'm not laying bricks right now and I'll have some catching-up

to do later'. Nevertheless, explaining dissatisfaction with himself, he spontaneously notices that 'it's not the right choice' to waste energy on self-humiliation, although to 'realize something' Gleb always needs to have 'an inner dialogue', because nobody other than himself can bring about any decisions or actions.

Gleb's quest is a complicated yet preferred way of self-realization. Currently this young man is going through many changes in his views, attitudes and behaviours which might be chaotic and exhausting. At the same time he admits the importance of having a personal outlook and takes a high degree of responsibility for shaping his own path in life, choosing and reaching his life goals. This kind of quest might become a lifelong process of transformation that means staying true to oneself at every single moment. Like Alyona, Gleb is also motivated by the desire to fulfil himself by acquiring a sense of self-authenticity, but unlike her, he puts a stronger emphasis on the cultivation of a desirable self (which could be term a *constructing* attitude) rather than discovering his inner essence (which could be termed a *deconstructing* attitude).

The binaries of spiritual quest

The present study develops a nuanced perspective on the notion of spiritual quest by means of the analysis of interviews by young adults who have found themselves in the seeking mode. On the basis of the interviews, it is possible to identify several aspects that are inherent in spiritual quest, but that can be variously experienced and manifested in different constellations across particular individual cases. For heuristic purposes, these can be approached in terms of the following binaries:

- attached/detached stance,
- emancipation/exploration motivation,

- solo/shared experience,
- relational/pragmatic focus of the seeking,
- active/passive self-positioning,
- encouraging/discouraging vision on a quest,
- inner/outer orientation,
- faith/truth intention,
- constructing/deconstructing way of self-enhancement.

This suggested list of binaries is not exhaustive and could be extended by the further analytical consideration of the data.

Interviews from three countries show that spiritual quest starts before and independently of factual detachment from the church. In this regard, the seeker mode can oscillate between the attached/detached. In relation to this factor, in his or her seeking a person can be motivated by either emancipation from a current affiliation or commitment, or the exploration of new possibilities and potential worldviews.

Another observation is that, for all the interviewees, spiritual quest is rendered as a strictly personal – solo – experience; no-one spoke about like-minded individuals with whom they share this path, despite the fact that the YARG interview guide contained a set of questions on socialization, significant communities and attachments. Nonetheless, in some cases spiritual quest can focus on relations: motivated by a desire for community and being willingly directed towards other people. By contrast, spiritual quest can also be quite pragmatic and primarily focused on specific means to satisfy personal spiritual needs, such as attaining a sense of calm through practices such as, for example, meditation.

This study has also opened up a duality of the spiritual quest phenomenon. In particular it concerns individuals' perception or their position in this process: active and passive. The difference between active

and passive positions is vividly illustrated in the Polish cases: one participant sees himself as having left the harbour, while the other finds himself lost. As seen from these examples, this distinction might bring about two juxtaposed visions on a quest: while active self-positioning makes a story of 'being in quest' sound encouraging, a passive stance instead becomes linked to discouragement.

The empirical material also allows us to assume that quest can be marked by either an *inner* or *outer* orientation. This relates to whether a seeker searches for answers within himself or herself, as, for instance, the female interviewee from Russia; or, in contrast, reaches out for something yet unknown, to discover, enquire and find appropriate answers. Additionally, in the cases studied, the outer orientation goes along with a desire to attain absolute truth (or at least to examine ideas that are believed to be true). The opposed intention can be expressed as a 'longing for deeper faith' that is more likely to fit with the inner orientation of a spiritual quest.

For many, spiritual quest is associated with self-realization and self-enhancement. However, individuals differ in their experiences depending on precisely how they perceive 'the self'. As seen from the empirical material under study, there can be either a constructing or deconstructing attitude that, to some extent, defines the personal meaning of spiritual quest for an individual. Those who tend to cultivate some specific traits, skills or lifestyle in order to become who they want to be represent a constructing attitude, whereas individuals with a deconstructing attitude are much more concerned with self-knowledge and understanding themselves as they are already.

The personal accounts of being in quest explored here also clearly reflect some

of the peculiarities of the religious situation in each country. Thus, the Finnish cases represent quest as a process of liberation (emancipation) from pre-given (or known, perceived) systems of beliefs and social structures (embodied in the institutional church). Polish participants, by contrast, largely stay within their tradition (attached), but are searching for something more than the Catholic church can provide in terms of answers on existential matters and the meaning of life. Finally, accounts from Russia depict spiritual quest as a process of self-enhancement that extends far beyond religious concerns, as these young adults do not feel deeply involved with the Orthodox tradition.

Conclusion

This study has applied the notion of spiritual quest in cultural contexts where it has not been yet properly studied, namely, Lutheran Finland, Catholic Poland and Orthodox Russia. Based on a unique dataset from the international YARG-project this study has aimed to demonstrate the variety and breadth of spiritual quest in a comparative perspective. As illustrated above, although every individual might attach his or her own logic to 'being in quest', a comparison of separate individual cases based on the concept of the seekership habitus reveals several main binary ways in which 'being in quest' typically tends to manifest in actual practice.

As such, this study provides a general categorization of different, empirically grounded, modes of 'being in quest', which underscores how this notion is still in need of further refinement if it is to serve its heuristic and analytic function. The perspective of individualization, on the one hand, and the concept of seekership habitus on the other hand, have helped to reveal the duality of the phenomenon of spiritual quest; its

potentially subjugating force (passive self-positioning) and frustrating character (discouraging vision on quest). The suggested range of categories which shape the experiences of spiritual quest need to be tested in further studies, both qualitative and quantitative. The analytical categories outlined here can usefully inform future quantitative research designs, thereby allowing research to move beyond an exclusive focus on mere identification as a spiritual seeker.

The variation in young adults' personal experiences of 'being in quest' that were revealed through the YARG interview data points to the complexity of the phenomenon of spiritual quest and its plural rather than universal character. In this regard, the relation between subjectively perceived experiences of spiritual quest and the specifics of the (religious) contexts to which they belong are certainly deserving of further study. ■

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