
REDEFINING HUMAN-NATURE DICHOTOMY: THE VOICE OF SPIRITUAL-ECOLOGICAL MOVEMENT IN ENVIRONMENTALITY DEBATE

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Abstract

The article presents an analysis of alternative attitudes to nature originating from diverse spiritual systems that “redefine” human-nature dichotomy as a mainstream relation of the “Western” world. It places it within the environmentality framework, as proposed by R. Fletcher, identifying it as truth environmentality – a specific form of environmental governance that “produces” individuals who care about the environment on the basis of establishing (or revealing) deep spiritual connection with it. The article explores this connection and the various models and methods for living with nature and outlines some potential contributions of the spiritual systems to the envisioned new models of environmental governance.

Keywords: *human-nature dichotomy; spiritual systems; truth environmentality; nature conservation*

Introduction

Contemporary nature conservation has shown its limitations in diverse ways, encompassing various levels of its implementation. Global environmental politics has reached a complexity previously unseen (Fletcher 2017) often failing to grasp the diversity of landscapes, ontologies, and cultural specifics that compose the global natural and human world. While we face failure to halt the global biodiversity loss, humans seem to become further and further disconnected from nature, establishing a greater gap between the natural and human worlds. The so called nature-culture dichotomy that has marked the relations of the Western world (Fletcher 2016) with nature is not only a category marker but also a relationship which plays a major role in contemporary environmental governance, shaping the models of conserving nature. The variety of human-nature relations that exist worldwide have, however, attracted the attention of scholars and conservationists, calling for diverse and alter-

native approaches to nature conservation that attempt to build upon these diverse relations. Such approaches are undertaken by both the social and natural sciences in streams such as posthumanism, “more-than-human geography” (Whatmore 2006), conviviality or “living with” (Hinchliffe, Whatmore 2006), multispecies ethnography and others, aiming to provide adequate space for both human and nonhuman actors. They have, however, not yet come to play a significant role in global environmental governance and have not received adequate attention from policy makers. While awaiting transformations on the global environmental arena, such do occur at a smaller scale in the case of various social and spiritual (religious) movements that have not only attempted to establish a more just and respectful relationship between people and nature (Sponsel 2012, Escobar 1996) but have also applied it into practice. These alternatives (Escobar 1996) fall namely within the raising calls of scholars for a new environmentalism based in an “ethics of care or sense of spiritual affinity between humans and nonhumans” (Boff, 2008, in- Fletcher, 2017) and require, therefore, more thorough research. The article undertakes namely this task, proposing that similar alternative relationships can play a significant role for environmental governance (environmentality) by outlining more beneficial models of human-nature relations in a critical period of misbalance between development and nature conservation.

“Truth” environmentality

The origin of the concept of environmentality can be traced back to M. Foucault’s “governmentality” (Foucault 2007) – a concept that gained huge popularity and was applied in variety of ways by “countless researchers” (Fletcher 2017) around its primary purpose for the analysis of the use of power to direct human actions and behavior. It was also applied in the context of environmental governance, as “such processes are primarily designed to modify human behaviors that affect biodiversity” (Salafsky 2001: 185). Hence, “environmentality” became a tool for analysis of the ways in which people can be enrolled in conservation efforts, or how they begin to care about the environment – a process that Agrawal describes as the creation of “environmental subjects” (Agrawal 2005). While Agrawal’s work is perhaps one of the most quoted in regard to the concept of environmentality, his analysis is later referred to Foucault’s disciplinary mode of governmentality (Fletcher 2017) while there exist other forms of environmental governance. Robert Fletcher (2010, 2017), analyzing the complex landscape of environmental politics, is namely the first to relate the concept of environmentality to the later works of M. Foucault where he distinguished more nuanced forms of governmentality, unlike the unified meaning he applied to the term in his earlier work.

Following these Fletcher (2010) outlines a framework that comprises four distinct types of environmentalities, used by him and other researchers to analyze the “complex landscape of environmental politics” (Fletcher 2017):

(1) neoliberal environmentality, a form based on the processes of commoditization of nature and the market mechanisms applied in conservation;

(2) disciplinary form, analyzed as an “effort to create ‘environmental subjects’ through diffusion of ethical norms” (Fletcher 2010: 177);

(3) sovereign environmentality, that acts via control and regulations (such as the fortress conservation approach and its “fences and fines’ strategy” (Fletcher 2010: 177);

(4) “truth” environmentality, described as the “art of governing according to truth” (Fletcher 2010: 177).

The last type of environmentality is particularly relevant for the present research relating namely the field of religiousness/spirituality to environmental governance. In its original context, Foucault relates his truth governmentality to the “truth of the religious texts, of revelation, and of the order of the world” (Foucault 2008). Prescriptions for behavior in this case are related not to just norms and rules but rather correspond to the claims that “such prescriptions accord with the fundamental nature of life and the universe” (Fletcher 2010: 176). Distinguishing the diverse forms of environmental governance in his framework, Fletcher defines as truth environmentally branches such as the deep ecology, grounded on the basis of essential interconnection between humans and nature (Fletcher 2010), the various attempts for application of the traditional ecological knowledge to diverse conservation regimes (Berkes 2008), as well as multiple forms of spirituality. Other researchers such as Sponsel (2012), further deepen the understanding of truth environmentality, demonstrating the connection between various form of spirituality and environmental management, such as the case of Thai Buddhists’ work on tree conservation as part of their religious duties (Sponsel 2012), a work which contributes to Thailand’s leading role in the field of ecology. Further, Erb (2012) and Bluwstein (2017) identify “truth” environmentality among other forms of environmental governance, where the first shows how the explosion of the villages of Roe, Eastern Indonesia to different forms of environmentalities have “crafted their own kind of ‘truth’” (Erb 2012: 19) resulting in practices of pilgrimage and prayers. However, while these works mostly “identify” truth environmentality, it remains not much analyzed as such *per se* and its ground principles – not particularly clarified.

Finally, as both the concepts of governmentality and environmentally are traditionally associated with and analyzed in respect to governance related to centralized power, I apply the decentered notion of governance (Bluwstein 2017) or the spread of this power among various actors and institutions, a concept that covers a range of approaches to policy development and management practices nowadays. It is relevant for the cases of the spiritual/religious groups explored here, in which norms and attitudes to nature are defined by the spiritual leader (teaching), whose “charismatic power” (Бегер 1994, Toncheva 2015) provides the legitimacy to establish such a norm and to direct behavior in accordance with the universal *truth*.

What distinguishes truth environmentality from the other forms of environmental governance is namely its claim to be able to establish an “essential connection”

(Bluwstein 2017: 103) between people and nature. Here we enter the long term debate about human-nature relations to which I am going to pay attention in the next section.

Human-nature dichotomy

The history of nature conservation and environmental governance has demonstrated that the main struggles to find successful conservation models are related to the big dilemma of humans or nature, or the idea who should gain larger benefit. Most of the contemporary approaches have proven unable to find a balance in the existence of people and nature. This fact is not surprising, considering that human-nature relations have been complex and culturally dependent throughout human history. As researchers have observed, the concept of “nature” is “perhaps the most complex word in the language” (Williams 1983: 221, in – Fletcher 2016: 3). Anthropology does not provide an unambiguous answer, as despite the assumptions of the structuralism of C. Lévi-Strauss (1969) that the worldview of primitive societies relies on the nature-culture dichotomy, later anthropological research has shown that for the majority of so-called “traditional societies” such a division does not exist. Nowadays, the widely applied concept of the “nature-culture dichotomy” or the divide between humans and nature is considered precisely a “characteristic of a Western worldview in the modern era” (Fletcher 2016: 3). As worldwide-dominating conservation approaches originate namely from the Western cultural perspective, the dichotomy has turned into their characteristic marker that defines human-nature relations nowadays. As a result, Western society is even analyzed by Louv as suffering from a condition of a “nature-deficit disorder” (Louv 2005). The means of healing the disorder is the “reconnection” with nature, which has turned into the “mantra of the modern culture” (Zylstra et. al. 2014). Some researchers see the paradox in the call and its methods, as while attempting to overcome the condition of disorder via means such as alternative conservation approaches, ecotourism, environmental education, we have not advanced further, but reached a state of its reinforcement (Fletcher 2016).

Furthermore, in the context of development, as analyzed by political economy, nature is constructed as a form of capital to be exploited, and external from the human element (Escobar 1996). Escobar (1996) has demonstrated how nature is perceived as simply raw material for economic growth, the latest form of which he identifies as a “post-modern form of capital”, in the sustainable development discourse. This perception has been characteristic for the “anthropocene”, or the present human-dominated period (Ruddiman et al., 2015) and responsible for the major loss of the world’s biodiversity that is still threatening a large number of species.

It is evident, after everything said, that the issue of human-nature relations and the construction of nature are of major importance in the domain of environmental

governance. Their “redefinition”¹ (Escobar 1996) is therefore seen as a way forward which would allow to move beyond the human focus of the so-called “anthropocene” (Ruddiman et al., 2015) acknowledging the unity of life on Earth as one socio-ecological system (Redman et al., 2004). Escobar (1996) calls namely for re-consideration of the dichotomy, in the context of the poststructuralist political ecology, via alternative and ecologically sustainable strategies that he explores among *various social movements*. The call is also undertaken by multiple disciplines – ethnography, with the establishment of the so called “multispecies ethnography” that provides space for other than human actors (Hurn 2012); cultural geography and the branch of “more-than-human geography” (Whatmore 2006); political economy and the recognition of the role of animal agents as introduced by Barua (2016), and others. What they all share in common is namely the purpose to return to the “livingness” or to shift the attention of the world “out there”, called environment or nature, to the intimate corporeality of “in here” (Whatmore 2006). Brining this issue to the stage of global politics, B. Latour claims that “we need a completely new cosmopolitics” (Latour 2011:80) that corresponds to the “new relations between humans and non-humans” (Latour 2011:80).

The outlined scientific debates were brought up together not just aiming to demonstrate the significance of human-nature relations and the construction of nature for environmental governance, but also because they are very relevant for the cases that I am going to examine next. The spiritual movements propose namely re-definition of human-nature dichotomy and alternative view of nature that provide a basis for diverse from the mainstream approaches to environmental governance. Via deeper research on questions regarding the perception of nature, its conservation, and means of “re-connection”, we can also better understand the ground principles of truth environmentality and its potential contributions for a more just environmental governance for both humans and nature.

The three cases that I am going to examine are examples of new religiosity, in some cases – spirituality based on self-determined and eclectic principles and even elements of Buddhism. Therefore I apply the broader definition of spirituality which can encompass a broader variety of beliefs, and won’t engage in debate about their definition as this is not the primary purpose of the article. The specific cases I discuss below are biodynamic agriculture, originating from the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner; the White Brotherhood, a new religious movement, founded by the Bulgarian spiritual master Petar Deunov; and the Spiritual Rainbow community, a spiritual movement founded by the German teacher Jurgen Hummes. The cases will be presented separately, while later some commonalities will be outlined in the course of the analysis in the presented theoretical background.

¹ The calls for “redefinition” of nature-culture relation can be traced back to the poststructuralist approach (Bourdieu 1977) and the idea that such structures are perceived as a product of human creation (often unconscious and determining humans’ actions).

The research has its standpoint in environmental anthropology and benefits from well established ethnographic fieldwork methods – interviews (semi-structured as well as online questionnaires) and participant observation, as well as selective literature review. The specific cases that are narrated here were carried out during a year and a half project examining the relation between ecology and spirituality² in various farm holdings, spiritual settlements and communities in Bulgaria. For the case of biodynamic agriculture I am discussing a representative case of a farmer with whom an in-depth interview was carried out, supported by observation of the farm activities. The farm was situated in the area of Plovdiv. In the second similar methods were applied, while the in-depth interview was carried out with the spiritual leader himself (sometimes in discussion with some of his followers) in the settlement of the community in the village of Odrintsi, Southeast Bulgaria. The case of the White Brotherhood, presented here, is based on two representative in-depth interviews with member of the community in the region of Petrich. The specific cases are chosen as representative narratives and are supported by other fieldwork data. In the in-depth interviews the emphasis was on understanding the established human-nature relation, the activities and practices related nature as seen from the differing perspectives of the specific communities. The discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Biodynamic agriculture (the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner)

The ideologist of the agricultural system known as biodynamic agriculture was the founder of anthroposophy (the so-called “spiritual science”) Rudolf Steiner³. It developed in opposition to the mainstream agriculture of the first half of 20th century, grounded on the principles of chemistry and directed by neoliberal aims (financial benefit), and is an expression of Steiner’s “spiritual-scientific research” (Щайнер 2011). In a few words, it is based on Steiner’s ideas that all living beings possess not only physical but also ether body (which supports the substance-dynamic state) and that nature is a unified ecological-cultural system. Biodynamic agriculture rejects, therefore, the use of chemical substances claiming that they are contained within nature and among various cultures and can therefore be extracted from there rather than artificially produced. This form of agriculture and the biodynamic farm is, due to these beliefs, considered a complete chain or a system of elements that complement each other to form harmonic relationships.

² Thanks to the project “Between ecology and spirituality: redefining human-nature dichotomy in postmodernity” funded by the Program for support of young scholars of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences („Между екология и духовна култура: предефиниране на дихотомията природо-култура в постмодерността”, Програма за подпомагане на млади учени, БАН, ДФНП 17–158).

³ Steiner talks about biodynamic agriculture in his lectures “Geisteswissenschaftliche Grundlagen zum Gedeihen der Landwirtschaft, Landwirtschaftlicher Kursus, GA 327.

While biodynamic farms, under the name “Demeter”, have existed around the world since 1956, there is no complete one in Bulgaria at present. Moreover, the question of whether the existing holdings are grounded on Steiner’s requirements that farmers should be familiar with basic principles of anthroposophy (Щайнер 2011) was also questioned during the research. Therefore the case presented here is of a non-certified biodynamic farm (due to specific views of its founder) but namely of a farmer whose philosophy is deeply influenced by Steiner and his anthroposophy, which was visible in the organization of the farm.

The farm of Mary⁴ was founded shortly after 2005 when she and her husband move back to her home village after struggling to live in the large capital. She began to develop her farm after becoming familiar with Steiner’s anthroposophy (which she also complements with the ideas of Petar Deunov)⁵, and it presently spreads over multiple agricultural plots around and outside the village. The principles that define her attitude to the farm are those of anthroposophy where the human is a “sacred actor” (ФНАИФ № 2993) and acts with a purely conscious attitude and with respect towards everything, being familiar with the interconnections within nature. The attitude towards plants (and nature) and human’s experiences are therefore seen as essential part not only of biodynamic agriculture but of life in general.

The farmer is a sacred actor, he participates with clearly conscious acts and respect towards everything, he acknowledges the interconnections...the Master also said it (Petar Deunov, S. T.), respect towards the living in any form...water, for instance, changes its crystal structure with one’s attitude, the same is true for warm water (purification of the organism, S. T.), it’s not the same whether we will talk to the water and think about it or whether we will just warm it up and drink it...it’s all about our experience (ФНАИФ № 2993).

Mary’s agriculture includes, in this relation, daily observation of the plants and establishment of connection with them, as it is considered of high importance “to observe the plants and to feel them...I have sat for hours observing how the grasshoppers carry their babies...the water drops on the cabbage leaves...it’s a magic” (ФНАИФ № 2993). She also maintains strict records of the seeds she uses and the growth and development of various cultures with the purpose to analyze it and get herself acquainted with the various processes that occur in nature. Her approach follows the biodynamic guidance for no use of chemicals which results, in her experience, to the recovery of the soil and its revival: “on the third year I saw the how the soil revived” (ФНАИФ № 2993) which she considers a basic need for the farmer who wants to grow quality and “vital” food.

⁴ For reasons of anonymity I don’t use the real names of most of the characters. Their general profile can be characterized as middle age professionals, well educated, involved in diverse social spheres.

⁵ See below.

A very important element of biodynamic agriculture is also the acknowledgement and the understanding of the cosmic impact on the Earth and nature in general, and the crops in particular. Therefore life in the farm is connected to and synchronized with the rhythms of nature: “*It is very important to develop this sensitivity... to feel the rhythm (in nature), how the plants start growing after St. Peter’s Day*” (ФНАИФ № 2993). Working in these rhythms also means optimization of the organization and knowledge, leading to less work:

I live in the rhythm of nature, get up at 5 o’clock...the life in the village is not hard, as you work in the rhythm of nature...it’s never boring but fulfilling and pleasure...because we all exist in rhythm – the Earth, its core, all is rhythm, the paneurhythmy⁶... (ФНАИФ № 2993).

Due to this type of farming and attitude towards the plants and animals Mary claims to have “*developed such sensitivity to nature that I was not able to live without it*” (ФНАИФ № 2993).

This established attitude to farming and relation with nature is an alternative to the mainstream, evident in the opposition of the farmer to a number of its characteristics. For instance, critiqued is the notion of bio-certification which is defined as an expression of market-based principles and an attitude of mistrust:

We are not bio-certified, I do not want to support this twisted idea...why should the bio food be more expensive?... If we work in synchrony with the natural cycles...and maintain the ecosystems....we do not need to be more expensive (ФНАИФ № 2993).

The pure financial benefits of bio production are also seen as an expression of contemporary neoliberal economy, while the food should be of “*quality and accessible to everyone*”, while those who simply concentrate on the economic benefits will face the natural consequences (“*if we concentrate on the financial part...it is over with us*”, ФНАИФ № 2993).

Spiritual rainbow community

Spiritual rainbow community (Spirituelle Regenbogengemeinschaft) is a spiritual-ecological community founded by the German healer and spiritual teacher Jurgen Hummes. The community’s philosophical background is based on a deep connection between spirituality and ecology, and humans and nature in particular, visible in the claim of its founder that “*spiritually cannot fulfill itself without nature*” (ФНАИФ № 2993). According to the philosophy of J. Hummes one is believed

⁶ Paneurhythmy was developed by the spiritual teacher Petar Dunov, see below.

to be able to fully accomplish his purposes by the means of returning to nature and withdrawal from the contemporary mainstream (and “Western” in particular) lifestyle. In order to gain a better understanding of this connection I shortly present the history of the community, which is entangled with the life of its founder, leading from developed Germany to be found in a tiny, almost abandoned Bulgarian village.

The story of the community began with the long-term sickness of its founder and the inability of conventional medicine to provide treatment for or improvement in his condition. In a moment of despair he decided that help could not be expected, and so started looking for it elsewhere, namely in nature and the forests nearby his hometown in Germany. Via visions he managed to find a cure for his sickness, and found, in this way, his specific path to nature and the spiritual world (ФНАИФ № 2993). He received, moreover, the powers to act as a healer (*Naturheiler*) and was eventually able to help many people in their calls for help. This is described as his first realization of the deep connection between people and nature that he was able to transmit to his followers:

People who came to seek cure...could join my walks in the forest...everyone used to find a tree, sit down and attempted to find peace in oneself...this is how people started developing particular feelings for nature (ФНАИФ № 2993).

Realizing to a greater extent the negative influences of the contemporary lifestyle, he decided to transfer the life and activity of the community to Togo, Africa, where they remained for 8 years, working not only on their own development but also supporting the local community by founding a hospital and a school. Jurgen and his followers decided, after the indicated period, to move back to Europe due to various reasons. “*In a state of meditation*” a revelation was received, according to which Bulgaria was a suitable land to settle down in due to its preserved “*spiritual energy*”. There the community discovered the village of Odrintsi, Southwest Bulgaria, three years ago and bought land and houses. This is where the community resides presently and survives with their own production.

The community’s spiritual belief system is defined by its founder as closest resembling Tibetan Buddhism. This includes daily meditations and weekly lectures and discussions on spiritual topics. However, it is based on a realization of an essential connection between humans and nature, evident in the lifestyle of the community’s members who attempt to live as much in “*accordance with nature as possible*” and “*without compromises*” (ФНАИФ № 2993). This lifestyle is seen in opposition to current global situation and the humanity’s attitude to nature, evaluated as the “*spiritual collapse of humanity*”, which has “*lost connection with the soul and simply concentrated on the material progress and overconsumption*” (ФНАИФ № 2993). As J. Hummes claims:

Many people talk about the destruction of the environment...but it is much worse...the spiritual collapse will destroy mankind (ФНАИФ № 2993).

By losing the conscious connection with nature and the spiritual, humanity suffers, and according to the community's beliefs, an *ether* deficit – a vital and spiritual substance no longer produced by people, the last source of which is found in plants. The lifestyle of the community is therefore aimed at regaining the lost consciousness about the spiritual, accomplished via reconnection with and deep respect for nature – “*the nature around, animals and plants*” (ФНАИФ № 2993). The animals owned by the community are, respectively, treated only by natural means – hay with herbs collected from the nearby meadows and without the use of any artificial substances. If used for food the animals are only slaughtered under specific conditions – “*when the time for the soul of the animal to leave the body has approached*” (ФНАИФ № 2993) which means that people consume very little amount of meat: “*we don't eat meat for 3 to 6 months*” (ФНАИФ № 2993). The community aims to produce a variety of products that are clean and healthy, and therefore the crops are quite diverse.

This production is, moreover, aimed to cause as least damage to the environment as possible, in opposition to global agriculture which often results in the destruction of nature. The global environmental politics is critiqued, as in the case above, as being grounded only on “*market based mechanisms*”, and the contemporary means to deal with the environmental destruction we face – as inadequate and even further enhancing it. As an example the case with the broadly postulated vegetarianism is pointed out, which “*relies on the use of soya products that are actually grown in South America and the main reason for the destruction of the rainforests*” (ФНАИФ № 2993). Consumption and economic growth are, furthermore, seen as a deception of the modern human that further detaches him from nature and the truth. A “*spiritual revolution*” is therefore the necessary precondition which could lead to the transformation of the peoples' attitude. The new understanding should be built upon a different realization of the purpose of humans and nature, but it is only possible, according to the founder of the community, via realization of the “*spiritual essence behind the matter*” (ФНАИФ № 2993). A follower claims, in support of his words: “*this is how many of us started... but it's not about just hearing it...but also about living it*” (ФНАИФ № 2993). When people reach a state of “*spiritual beings*” this would also mean realization of the unity of everything existing.

The importance of the connection with nature is evident also in the educational methods applied by the community members with their children. They look at it as an alternative to most children, the product of contemporary education, which turns them into “*consumers*” (ФНАИФ № 2993). The children learn, therefore, directly from nature and are able, according to their educators, to distinguish the “*artificial*” (ФНАИФ № 2993) from the natural⁷.

⁷ Some of the community's members have previously worked as teachers, so children also receive knowledge on ground subjects.

The high value that is placed on life and nature is evident in the disappointment of the Spiritual Rainbow Community in relation to the educational methods and lifestyle, as noted by its founder:

Children (nowadays) have tablets when they are 5–6 years old...I can't imagine how when they are 30 they will rule this world...in economics, religion, politics...they have no feeling, know how to destroy with these game, but don't know how to bring something to life (ФНАИФ № 2993).

Summarizing, the leader of the community evaluates the role of nature for humanity: “people should find their own place and learn from nature in order to change themselves” (ФНАИФ № 2993). The belief also provides answer to the questions which the community members were asked or asked themselves: “We sit here 25 Germans, in Odrintsi, given up electricity, running water...what are we doing here? What do we want?”

The ecological lifestyle of the community has received interest from people seeking methods via which to get their children acquainted with ecology, from researchers and journalists, and with a recent documentary made that reflects the main beliefs of the Spiritual rainbow⁸.

White Brotherhood (the Teaching of Petar Deunov)

The Teaching of Petar Deunov and the community of his followers known as the White Brotherhood were established in the first half of 20th century in the context of the new religiosity (Toncheva 2015). It represents a spiritual worldview that can be characterized, in short, as having a Christian foundation entangled with eastern philosophical ideas (such as reincarnation, karma, etc.) and new age characteristics. Of particular importance for the present research is the fact that P. Deunov gives central significance to nature and the human's connection with it in his spiritual-philosophical system. Due to these beliefs and the activities of the community, we could claim that it has significant role in the development of mountain tourism and has influenced some ecological movements in Bulgaria.

Nature, in particular, is perceived as a manifestation of the divine principle (God) and the sentient powers in the universe by the community of the White Brotherhood. As a result, animals, plants and natural objects such as mountains, stones, springs, etc. are believed to possess a soul or at least a particular level of consciousness. The human attitude towards nature is, therefore, a reason for particular consequences (such as the law of karma) and is very significant for human well being. In particular, the establishment of connection with nature is seen as a means of connecting

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWYGAABHhBM&feature=youtu.be>.

with the “sensible forces of life” and important for both the physical health and the spiritual development of the human.

The Teaching influences the follower’s attitude to nature “*fundamentally*”, as a respondent claims: “*I started thinking...we should give priority even to an ant*” (ФНАИФ № 2993). Personal extraordinary experience of another member confirms his beliefs regarding the ultimate unity of people and nature:

We are connected...the nature and we are the same thing. Two years ago I was performing my morning practices...during the exercises at one point I found myself elevated above the house...was like I represent one big power...I asked: What happened to me? Once I asked I found myself in my living room but as if looking from outside in...my body was performing the exercises...I looked towards the plants and realized that I was breathing through them...whatever I turned towards, I was breathing through it...later I started thinking about this...I realized that we are in all that is and we are not just our body (ФНАИФ № 2993).

On a practical level the significance of this idea is evinced by the various practices established by P. Deunov and his followers in relation to nature. These include various methods such as hiking and walks in nature, work in the garden, the summer “spiritual camp” of the community at the Seven Rila lakes (Rila mountain, Bulgaria)⁹, various physical and spiritual exercises and most of all the method of Paneurhythmy. The summer camp at the Seven Rila lakes is seen as a sublime method for connection between humans and nature. It believed to represent the most “*beautiful refuge*” and a “*gateway*” to the spiritual world. Therefore the followers hardly miss it: “*I have not missed going to Rila already for 20 years. There you recharge for the whole year, the nature there is different, it is the library of humanity*” (ФНАИФ № 2993).

A lady explains the influence of these methods as:

I meet the sunrise every day...when I wake up early my whole day flows in harmony, even more when I perform paneurhythmy (ФНАИФ № 2993).

Paneurhythmy is a system of exercises, created by P. Deunov, perceived as the universal harmony of the movement and expression of the cosmic rhythm that is the foundation of life. Performing paneurhythmy is seen as a means of connection with the creative forces of nature and a tool for activation of the forces that reside within

⁹ At that period the followers camp in the high mountains of Rila National Park (at approximately 2300 m. attitude) for up to a period of 3–4 weeks in July-August. The event attracts thousands of followers nowadays. The region is chosen due to belief that it is the most energetic place on Earth, being compared to Tibet and the Himalayas, and in esoteric context with Agartha or Shambhala (in Tibetan and Indian Buddhism) – a mystical kingdom in Central Asia. It is, therefore, perceived as sacred by the community (Toncheva, 2017).

the human soul¹⁰. It is considered, therefore, the “*strongest means for connection with nature*” (ФНАИФ № 2993) by the community nowadays.

Apart from attempting to “connect” with nature, members of the White Brotherhood try to preserve it, using mostly ecological or, when possible, home grown products. They are also predominantly vegetarian. Some claim that use of prayers is beneficial for the growth of the various cultures, accompanied by positive attitude: “*we influence them (the plants, S. T.)...with care and love, but mostly with positive thinking*” (ФНАИФ № 2993). One of the respondents quoted here is also acting as a healer, producing his own herbal salves after collecting herbs in ecologically clean areas. He claims that this process is accomplished in a state of meditation and prayers, which results in much higher efficiency of the salve, stating that he was able to heal even a “*very bad eye injury*”. Natural elements such as air (via breathing exercises) and sunlight are also pointed out as possessing healing powers.

Despite being vegetarian, regarding the care of animals and the critique towards their bad treatment some members have become vegan. This attitude towards animals is expressed in the following story:

Once I was meeting the sunrise and it passed through my mind how they treat the hens...the Master tells in one lecture that the hen should lay 12 eggs and hatch chickens...but humans steal the eggs (ФНАИФ № 2993).

They relate the transformation of this particular view namely to the ideas of P. Deunov:

We never thought that within a particular animal some spirit could reside... the Master says that they could go there by their own will or for punishment, or because this soul wants to learn something...one ox, how patient he is! (ФНАИФ № 2993).

The various means for connection with nature provide justification, according to some, for the claims that most people from the community are “*able to find ways to exist in more harmonic relations with nature*” (ФНАИФ № 2993). The general human attitude and the Bulgarian environmental politics, in particular, are not positively evaluated by community members: “*people treat nature in a very unconscious manner, pollute and destroy it...but the conscious attitude is a slow process, to reach the realization that Earth and we are the same thing...and that when you pollute it you pollute yourself*” (ФНАИФ № 2993).

¹⁰ See more in Toncheva, 2015.

Discussion & conclusion

The analysis of the three cases has demonstrated how, despite the diverse origin of the examined spiritual systems, the human-nature relations that they establish are grounded on similar principles. If we look at the followers of the movements in the perspective of Agrawal's "environmental subjects" (Agrawal 2005), the process of coming to care about nature is grounded on the implementation of deep spiritual meaning in it, constructing nature as divine, a source of life and power, a means for self-development and a connection with the sacred world and a way to find meaning of the existence. Namely the implemented meaning and acknowledgement of the importance of nature for the life of the individual and Earth in general define an attitude to nature that differs from that commonly spread today – the neoliberal, constructing nature as a soulless commodity. It does, furthermore, provide a basis for the followers of the communities to recognize the necessity of establishing (or "acknowledging") a human's deep interconnection with nature and thereby ground their own on an attitude of care and respect. The established human-nature relation, for the examined communities, can be viewed in opposition to the "human-nature dichotomy", a main characteristic of contemporary "Western" culture (Fletcher 2010), redefining it and placing it onto new fundamentals – connectedness and unity of all. This is evidenced by the community members' attitude towards the nonhuman world – animals and plants, and essentially by the choice of some to withdraw from civilization and "return" to nature and the natural lifestyle.

The alternative human-nature relation that the spiritual-ecological movements establish is also evidenced in viewing it as in opposition to contemporary methods and attitudes which result in the destruction of nature: the failures of mainstream nature conservation, mass consumption and application of market-based mechanisms in the use of natural recourses. Particularly critiqued are the prices of bio products, global environmental policy and the Bulgarian environmental governance in particular.

Due to these specifics I placed the human-nature relations as established by the spiritual communities in the context of *truth* environmentality, outlined as a specific form of environmentality by R. Fletcher (Fletcher 2010). Obviously this form can be distinguished from the others particularly with the redefinition of the human-nature dichotomy, re-examining their fundamental principles of human-nature relations, replacing them with ethics of care and respect (at least as evidenced by the three cases examined here). Doing so, truth environmentality provides a basis also for granting more just rights to the nonhuman actors in the governance of the world, composed of diverse actors (Latour, 2011). It offers, therefore, an alternative approach to contemporary neoliberal conservation which is often criticized as attempting to save nature using the same tools that destroy it (Fletcher 2010).

However, grounding truth environmentality on the principle of universal truth (Foucault 2008) is also a fact that leads to its limitations, due to the establishment of human-nature relations that are grounded on individual beliefs and self-convic-

tion of the adepts of a particular spiritual system, questioning possible methods for its broader application. It can provide, however, insights that contribute to the establishment of more efficient approaches to nature conservation. In particular it confirms the claims that non-dichotomous human-nature relations are essential for the establishment of more just and harmonious relations between humans and nature and, respectfully, for more successful environmental governance, acknowledging the rights of both human and nonhuman actors.

Taking a glimpse into the debate about future forms of environmentality – liberation environmentality (Fletcher 2010) which political ecology envisions as a form of governmentality based on principles of democracy, participation and self-organization (achieving as harmonious cooperation as possible), research into spiritual-ecological can also contribute to the debate. These movements have demonstrated namely “different possibilities for relationships with each other and the non human world” (Sullivan 2006, in Fletcher 2010: 179) but also forms of self organization based, in the particular cases, on beliefs rather than external authorities. Their further study can provide, therefore, some insights also in this direction, in particular to the answer of the question about how this new environmentality “would look like in practice” (Fletcher 2010: 179) and support the quest of political ecology for envisioning this “brave new form” (Fletcher 2010) of environmental governance.

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Archive materials

ФНАИФ № 2993

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWYGAABHhBM&feature=youtu.be>

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