

‘Believers’ and ‘Non-Believers’ among the *Aussiedler* Immigrants in Germany and Canada

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Introduction

The seed for my interest in the religious borders of Mennonite communities was planted about ten years ago and has grown steadily over the years. I first became aware of the question at my grandparents’ fiftieth anniversary celebration in a Mennonite Brethren church in Germany. By chance I witnessed how my aunt argued with an older woman from that church, protesting, “[j]ust because we do not go to this church does not mean we do not believe in God!”, to which the other woman quickly responded: “Yes, it does!”¹

That was the moment I realized that this was exactly how I too pictured what it meant to be a Mennonite. The picture was set. If someone did not attend a Mennonite Brethren church, that person was not a true follower and was not addressed with the term of

being a 'believer,' while 'believers' were the ones attending church service and following the strict rules common in all of the Mennonite Brethren churches transplanted from Russia. To this day, when I think about what it means to be religious and follow God's rules, this one Mennonite Brethren congregation stands as the model of the correct way to serve God. In comparison, other churches seem to ignore many historic rules and are therefore non-compliant. When I learned, over time, that many others, who had also immigrated to Germany from those Mennonite colonies in Russia, thought the same way, the question of what constituted 'Mennonite' faith became a central one for me. Discussing the subject innumerable times with members of my family, which is divided into these so-called 'believing' and 'non-believing' ways of life, questions always remained: why, aside from this particular and apparently the only righteous way to serve God, is there no other path to follow and who decides which way is the right and wrong one?

The question whether someone is a believer in God or not may not often be spoken aloud or posed directly to someone. Among Mennonite colonies in Russia though, it has been the most important question dividing villages and colonies into two distinctive groups of people. Podolsk, a village of approximately 1,000 inhabitants in a German settlement called Neu-Samara, serves as an example. Established in 1890 as a daughter colony of the Molotschna settlement, its inhabitants, though they were tolerant of one another, had nonetheless arranged their lives along the borders of being either 'believer' or 'non-believer.' Due to this high intolerance of one side for the other, and since all the community's ways of living were based on Mennonite cultural and traditional heritage which was inextricably connected with people's lives, it never occurred to the inhabitants to question this dichotomous system.

In order to explain this religious, and thus also social, dichotomy, it is necessary to examine the history of this German enclave in Russia. Before Stalin's terror came to Russia, there was the Mennonite church in Pleshanowo and the Mennonite Brethren church in Lugowsk, both within the broader Podolsk settlement. The Mennonite Brethren church had grown out of a renewal movement in the Molotschna Mennonite settlement in South Russia² while the Mennonite Church had remained traditional, as it had been known in the parent colony. People from the villages therefore had a choice as to which congregation they wanted to belong. Both these churches, however, were banned in the early 1930s with the introduction of Stalin's regime in the Soviet Union.

During this period anyone preaching, praying or reading the Bible was sent to labour camps for a minimum of ten years.³

Some sixteen years later, after World War II, in 1946, a few people found the courage to come together for quiet Bible reading or for an evening of prayer, hidden away somewhere in the living room of a private house. These participants were mostly women, those who had been allowed to stay in the villages to care for the community's elderly and children under three years of age. Seven years later so many people began following the Mennonite Brethren church that this time became known as 'the Awakening' among Mennonites in Russia. The biggest change, however, was that there was now just one church in the colony, the Mennonite Brethren church, for the Mennonite Church had vanished from the colony. Peoples' choice therefore came down to either finding themselves a religious home in the Mennonite Brethren church, or not at all.⁴

From that dichotomous order of society emerged the idea that people who go to church are the 'believers'⁵ and those who do not live in accordance with the Brethren's conservative rules, and as a consequence do not attend church service on a regular basis, became the 'non-believers.'⁶ In the beginning, the label was used literally, to describe people who believed in God and people who did not. Over time it became a simplification of the social structure, meaning that 'non-believers' referred to those who did not follow these exact Mennonite rules and who did not attend the Mennonite Brethren church.

Due to the social separatism in Russia, where the German people were persecuted and faced a constant external threat until as recently as the 1980s, those who were not members of the Mennonite Brethren church did not consider establishing a parallel congregation, even though there were many likeminded individuals who disagreed fundamentally with the rules of the church. This reticence can be explained by considering how the external threat experienced by the Germans in Russia strengthened their internal social cohesion. Denying the church, therefore, became synonymous with denying the social structures, values, and traditions of the German people, along with their exhausting struggle for the right to serve God in an anti-religious environment.

In Germany

With the migration of Mennonites to Germany following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, the borders that had been relatively

closed to external society were torn apart, replaced with a movement of integration with the German autochthonous society. People from Podolsk, and also every other village of the Neu-Samara settlement, found themselves dispersed throughout Germany after moving from Russia.⁷ On the one hand, in this context of sudden societal upheaval, the religious congregations retained their previous structures thus creating some stability within this context of massive social change (Hettlage-Varjas and Hettlage 1984, 361ff).

Scholars argue that religion, as part of a traditional value system, creates a system that conveys sense or meaning on a higher level and that places the individual within a broader context (Luhmann 2000, 321f). During the migration process migrants feel the need to negotiate and redefine their identity in the new societal context. As a super ordained system, religion can give individuals a sense of orientation in this phase of searching. In this process of migration, of geographical disruptions, religion gains an even greater importance in the lives of individuals (Fuhse 2006, 56).

My own findings suggest that in addition to this role of religion, Mennonite tradition insists on the need for an individual's belief to be "the right belief, straight from the heart,"⁸ which is one of the reasons why structures in the existing communities have historically been maintained. A high degree of legalism prevails, often controlling the very details of the everyday lives of members. Deviations from traditional habits are not tolerated, for what was good in the past cannot be wrong in the present. In this case cultural and traditional customs are inextricably interwoven, neither questioned in the old country, nor in the new homeland. Over time this cocoon, however, has become brittle. When the Mennonites' social environment changed dramatically, external influences severely impinged upon the transplanted customs and started to challenge the fixed rules of the community.

At the turn of the millennium, approximately ten years after the immigration to Germany, these strong outside influences began to have an impact on the inner structures of the community and its previous concepts of faith came to a crossroads. An interview with Jakob P., a young man who is currently one of the six elders in a newly-established congregation in Germany, illustrates how the process of breaking away from the stronghold of the Mennonite Brethren church begins, how it evolves, and how it comes to a conclusion by charting its own path.

Jakob P.

In 1989, when the Iron Curtain finally allowed ethnic Germans from Russia to move freely from the Soviet Union to Germany, Jakob and his family migrated from the Neu-Samara settlement to Germany. At that time he was fourteen years old. His family had to leave all the familiar social structures and networks behind in order to establish a new life as Germans in Germany. In 1994, at the age of twenty, he was baptized into the Mennonite Brethren congregation of the village N.,⁹ where almost every member knew one another from their time in Russia. Virtually the entire social structure, the regulations, and traditional customs of this congregation, as well as the specific members attending the church, had remained almost unchanged during the migration process.

Throughout the years Jakob felt a strong wish for some change, for a transformation of the rules “in order to live out one’s own faith” and in accordance to the way “I understand faith.”¹⁰ He tried to talk to the elders in order to work together with the church leaders and seek support, but they turned him away and repeatedly rejected his ideas. After a time, when the congregation began to talk about building a new worship house, the situation became more serious for Jakob. He recalled that

Time played an important role. It is necessary to understand that the time was not the right one, the decision to build the [worship] house was too early because the foundation of the congregation was not strong enough to support such an endeavour.

In Jakob’s opinion, he and the elders were not capable of finding common ground on this issue. When the considerable differences that clearly existed between them could not be bridged, Jakob explained, “then it was the question of submitting oneself or leave – we left.”

When telling this story, Jakob emphasized that he and his five friends never did strive to leave the church in order to build a new congregation; instead, his primary ambition had been to find a common ground with his congregation. Conflicts emerged as Jakob and his friends argued that the world in Germany was a different one from the one in Russia and therefore some rules had to be changed. He used the example of the church’s position against the internet as one instance of a rule that needed to be adapted to the new circumstances. Jakob explained that studying at a university without the internet was impossible, but church leaders did not allow congregants to have internet access at home. As a

consequence, Jakob, together with five other families, left the Mennonite Brethren church in N. in 2003. When speaking of leaving the church, Jakob emphasized: "But what is important: we left the congregation in peace!" This was a very important point for him and he repeated it several times in the interview.

In the beginning the breakaway group held services "just like back then [in Russia], in a living room," reading the Bible and praying together. "Within four months there were sixty people with us in our living room." Clearly this confirmed his decision and indicated that other members also wished for a change.

The interesting thing about speaking to Jakob is his awareness about why these conflicts emerged and what the mechanisms responsible for the process were. Jakob named the trigger events and significant incidents that led him to the situation in which he later found himself. He elucidated that Mennonite congregations in Germany are structured in a very traditional way. He explained the link made by the church between maintaining Mennonite beliefs and the state of one's salvation, stating: "[w]e did not want to unravel our belief, [because] then our salvation will be in jeopardy." In Jakob's opinion, however, these Mennonite traditions do not necessarily derive from the Bible, which means that change was, and still is, an option and that clinging to existing regulations is not an absolute necessity.

Those who had left the congregation in N. waited for almost two years to explore their options and get to the bottom of what they really wanted and where they wanted to go from there. What Jakob himself wanted was clear: to set future goals and lay a foundation for a more open church where an individual could make decisions about appropriate behaviour, according to his or her own interpretations of the Bible. The congregation's role in this model would be to give guidance and set an example of its conduct, instead of including or excluding members due to either "right" or "wrong" behaviour.

In 2005 Jakob and those five other former congregation members established a new congregation in H.,¹¹ called the Christliche Gemeinde H. They were now a registered non-profit organization in Germany, and as such, bore the responsibility for all legal and financial matters.¹² The membership began growing and by 2014 realized that they would soon have to decide on whether it was time to build a new worship house, as their current church could not contain all the members on a Sunday service.

When asked whether they refer to themselves as Mennonites, Jakob responded in the negative: "I did not want to be pigeonholed, didn't want to get branded as *these* Mennonites. I am Christian"¹³

because Jesus died for me. Being a Mennonite is a part of my character, but I do not identify with it." With this statement it becomes evident that Jakob's dilemma derives from the strong linkage between both a Mennonite identity as a religious group as well as a cultural and ethnic group. While he tries to break free from the religious customs of the Mennonites, he also does not want to lose his cultural and ethnic Mennonite roots. For Jakob, however, more important than being grounded in the ethnic roots of Mennonitism is his identity as "a believer," despite having left the parent church.

In her book *Zwischen Austritt und Ausschluss: Exklusion und Distanzierung aus evangelikalen Gemeinden russlanddeutscher Aussiedler*,¹⁴ Esther Lösse describes the process of decision-making, similar to Jakob's:

The emphasis on community, especially at the moment of migration, therefore, provides security, but with some people it leads to feelings of dissonance. First, it is a cognitive and social narrowness, which is characterized by feelings of heteronomy, self-alienation and mind control. In contrast to this initial situation, a new identity is then designed – as this mirror image cancels this conflict. Processes of self-discovery, self-realization and self-liberation emerge. The confined conditions are thus opened in favour of a way of life, with new developed opportunities, self-conceptions, new options of actions and contacts. Previously insurmountable social and cognitive boundaries are irrelevant, seemingly dichotomous 'worlds' are integrated in a creative way to a new mode of being.¹⁵ (Lösse 2011: 107f).

The process Lösse describes is the basic process of individuation, in which individuals replace an all-encompassing group orientation. However, the transformation of previous symbolic systems is a tedious and sometimes painful and alienating process for an individual, as old social affiliations are broken and new ones are established. The first steps in this process commence when an individual begins to sense that his or her own experience runs contrary to that of the group. This often occurs when newly-established regulations in the community become imbued with a sense of ultimate, or even eternal, authority, which the individual feels is not deserved and which do not align with his or her own understandings and beliefs (Lösse 2011, 112). Significantly, this development is described by those involved as something positive. Almost all interviewees in Lösse's study described stories of a new job or career, or a sense of self-discovery or personal liberation. They broke away from a background that they experienced as extremely cramped, overburdening and stressful (Lösse 2011, 107).

This becomes clear in Jakob's case when he points out that his understanding of what it means to be a Christian is that one should live a life according to biblical values rather than to Mennonite traditions.

When asked about his opinion regarding the churches in western Canada where many of his acquaintances have settled from Germany, Jakob replies that in places like Steinbach, Manitoba, one is offered the "whole spectrum." In contrast to Aussiedler churches in Germany, those in Canada not only change to become more liberal, but they can also become more conservative, or even, as Jakob terms it, "dis-charismatic," referring to Mennonite Brethren churches that shut out almost every secular influence in their lives and go back to living in small enclaves.

In the end he tells me to greet his sister, his uncle and some of his friends who moved to Canada and now live in Steinbach and Winkler.

In Canada

In his book *Imagined Homes* (Werner 2007), historian Hans Werner describes the migration wave of the 1970s in which a significant number of Germans from Russia moved to Bielefeld, Germany, and then beyond that, from Germany to Canada. He compares these immigrants' integration in both countries and demonstrates the differences and difficulties the migrants negotiated in this process. Most of their struggles were due to the severe clash of the immigrants' and host-society's perception that integration in Germany was more difficult for ethnic Germans from Russia than it has been in Manitoba. Arriving in Germany, Germans from Russia expected the country and its people to resemble their imagined idea of Germany and thus also their own German identity. As a consequence, tensions with the receiving society produced defensive strategies in the immigrants, resulting in their desire to hold on to and maintain their separate identity – which indeed is a very different one than the host society. Therefore, the migration from the former Soviet Union became more of an experience of integration into a foreign society, similar to that experienced by these immigrants in Canada, and less an experience of coming home, as they had expected it to be (Werner 2007, 7).

What Werner ascribed to the migration movement in the 1970s is applicable to the current phenomenon in which Germans originating in Russia have begun to immigrate to Canada from

Germany. This time, however, these new immigrants have already lived in Germany for several years, built homes, raised families and become settled in this new homeland. This settlement pattern changed in 1998 when Manitoba started a new program to facilitate immigration into rural areas of the province. Hundreds of these families started to leave Germany to re-establish themselves in another new homeland in Manitoba, Canada.

The Provincial Nominee Program

The federal and provincial governments in Canada developed the Provincial Nominee Programs (PNPs) in the late 1990s in order to disperse immigrants more evenly throughout the country and counter the trend of migrants settling mostly in Canada's three largest cities. These programs allowed provinces to recruit and nominate potential immigrants using selection criteria that met locally defined needs. Since the program began, immigration to Manitoba increased dramatically, from nearly 3,000 in 1998, for example, to 11,000 in 2007. Some programs, like the one in Manitoba, offered streams that allowed individuals to apply for immigration even without a job offer, provided that they could demonstrate employability and strong ties to the province through either friends or family. Even though nine provinces had a PNP in 2007, nearly half of the immigrants landing in Canada were destined for Manitoba (Pandey and Townsend 2010, 5f).

In southern Manitoba, an accumulation of Dutch-North German ethnic Mennonites have, over the course of more than one century, acculturated to Canadian society, changing or growing away from the culture the first Mennonite settlers brought to the region. With a constant stream of Mennonites moving to this exact geographical region over a long period of time, one would assume that some of the Aussiedler immigrants from Germany would merge with the long settled ethnic and religious communities with whom they share a similar background. But upon closer inspection, one finds an increasing number of splinter groups and breakaway fractions. As Jakob mentioned above, there is "the whole spectrum" of varying levels of devotion among this population in southern Manitoba.

Intending to preserve their ethnicity, Germans from Russia with a Mennonite background have chosen to migrate into an area with a cultural background that is, on a macro-level, similar to theirs. In this case, they have migrated predominantly to former Mennonite settlements. For my dissertational thesis I visited Manitoba in 2011

and interviewed families, asking about their motivation and causes for migration. The interviews did not explicitly ask about their religious attitude, but people spoke a lot about their church background. In most cases it was a significant part of their cultural background, or even was one of the major issues that had led to their migration. The role of religion in these migrants' lives becomes clear in the following statements. Moreover, these interviews show that there are always two sides to one coin: in some cases, religion can be a positive, life-changing, or even life-saving, turning point; in others, where a closed community that defines itself by certain religious creeds does not tolerate deviations, it can be a force for exclusion.

With the first statement from Victor (who lives in the village of Mitchell, is married, the father to four children, and a member of a German Lutheran church) it becomes very clear why southern Manitoba is so popular with ethnic Germans from Russia. Although not of Mennonite descent, he sums up precisely what many religious migrants themselves said in their interviews:

[...] But I have to add, that it is not everywhere like this, like in this area. It is distinctive, impressive. It is very strongly influenced by the Christians. With regard to the population, we have the most churches [per capita] in the world. We are practically listed in the book of world records because we have so many churches, but just a little population. Meanwhile there are thirty-three or thirty-four churches....just in Steinbach. Yes, we have many churches. That was the reason why we wanted to come here. We wanted to move to an area where it is very...*ehm* [Victor was careful about choosing these words] 'safe' from the Christian point of view. (Victor S. 2011)

The idea of being 'safe' from the Christian point of view was especially important for many Mennonite families with a more conservative background. Evidently Manitoba was particularly popular because its cultural matrix met the families' needs, whereas in Germany it was the other way around: families had to adapt to a 'corset' of social regulations that tied them too tightly to a stipulated way of living.

The second statement makes clear that with many people religious categories can also vary in unexpected ways. When asked to what church he belongs, another interviewee, Anatoli (from Lorette, married, with twelve children) remarked that "we have opened a Russian German [church], one for ourselves, just like a community, 'Heart of Victory.'" (Anatoli S. 2011) Asked whether it is based more on the Catholic or evangelical church, his answer is: "No, no, that is a Christian one."¹⁶ (Anatoli S. 2011)

His answer implies that other religious interests are not 'Christian' ones, or that, at least for him, they do not belong to the 'right Christian' group. This statement raises the question of whether there is a certain degree of intolerance towards other religious beliefs that can be found among the migrants from Germany (originating in Russia). Additionally, how does that differ from the wider population in Canada? Unfortunately this study cannot answer these questions.

Similarly, Lydia (from Steinbach, married, with two children) explained that she not only found religion and God for herself in Steinbach, but also a church where she found genuine people she could trust. She described her feelings toward the behavior of many members of other churches in Steinbach:

What I realized in [one particular] congregation [not the one she attends], that they are very strict with what they show on the outside. I mean for most people here being strict means they have to wear a skirt, some let's say moderate, [...] when I see them walking down Main Street, in a caravan of dressed up and done-up on their way to church – that is for me not church service, for me that is showing off how awesome I am. And behind it all, you find nothing [of religious substance]. (Lydia K. 2011)

With regard to the congregation Lydia found for herself in Steinbach she described a life of being calm and trusting, now that she finally found God. This could happen in her life, because her church did not tell her how to behave or how to dress. As she explained, dress is one's own choice, that is, if one reads the Bible as a conscientious and intelligent human being. Being confronted with the other, more conservative Mennonite churches' strict rules and people's contradictory behaviour, Lydia sees a lie. The "caravan of dressed up and done-up" betray the one thing Lydia learned to treasure in her life – a clear structure of integrity.

On a micro-level, personal contacts, such as family, friends, church or school, play an important role in the decision-making process concerning the migration from Germany to Canada. This social reality became especially obvious when I talked to Alexander who migrated to Steinbach by himself, although hoping that his sister's family would follow. Alexander describes a problem that is the result of the presence of so many churches in Steinbach: "I have already been everywhere. For example, I am Protestant, yes, evangelical....[and] am interested [in various churches, because], I don't have a problem in saying I believe in God. But honestly I have to admit, I [would] not go to a particular congregation because

wherever I went, I would feel as if that [you had entered into a private]....a family business.” (Alexander H. 2011)

Alexander described his feelings as an outsider no matter what church he went to. He said that going to a church was similar to the feeling of going into someone’s private house without being invited inside.

[...] and although the Bible is *one*, why are you all so different? Just because your *family* says so [clapping hands]. This family runs a congregation [clapping hands], family, again and again it is family. [...] And what I really dislike, and what also disappointed me, that among our people, [people as a *Volk*, a people] that there are so many beliefs – I never thought this could happen. [...] And I always get the feeling, if you are not, let’s say for example a Pentecostal, then you are, I wouldn’t say a nobody, but [...] you aren’t worth it. (Alexander H. 2011)

He went on to describe this feeling of being an outsider in the dating scene, a very important social field with which young, single men must reckon: “[...] And it is very difficult to get into contact with women. [...] The first question is always: What church does he go to? So when you do not go to church, you are an outsider.” (Alexander H. 2011) By the time I interviewed him, Alexander had already made plans to return back to Germany, after having lived in Manitoba on his own for three years.

In southern Manitoba, Germans from Russia have found a broad variety of churches: Canadian, Russian, German, and *Plautdietsch* congregations, private gatherings in houses, or maybe no church at all. And with this variety of churches, they have also found a broad range of possible choices about where to attend, or to simply establish a new one when they have felt it was necessary. Being tied to the black and white system they were accustomed to in Russia, the dichotomy of either being a ‘believer’ or not still affects these migrants’ lives. They struggle with the negotiations of boundaries time and again, questioning the degree to which someone is a ‘believer’ or a ‘non-believer’ or asking questions like; what happens to ‘my faith’ when I really dare to leave the congregation that my ancestors established?; or what will happen to my family if I dare to go my own way?

While processes like that take up to two years to mediate in Germany, as in Jakob’s case, the new social boundaries in Canada, praised by some interviewees as a kind of ‘promised land,’ allow a new level of individuality to develop. Where no one had chosen certain roads before, in Canada people have start picking and choosing, trying various options for themselves and deciding what suits them the best. There are families whose members see one

another on a Sunday only after the church service, for lunch or in the afternoon, because each member has chosen a different way. And they are happy about it; not only have they finally gained freedom in faith, religion and worship, they have also gained the freedom to choose their own way of life.

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Notes

- ¹ Many of the direct quotations in this article are translated by the author from the original Low German into English. ["Dout heit nech, blous wils wie nech nu disse Tjuatj gune, daut wi nech on Gott jeleewe!" - "Doch!"]
- ² Cf. http://www.gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Brethren_Church
- ³ Cf. C. F. Klassen, 'Die kirchliche Entwicklung in Russland', Jan./Feb. 1949; Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg, C. F. Klassen Papers, File 12; J. A. Neufeld, 'Die Religion im heutigen Russland', Feb. 7, 1951, Archives of the Mennonite Church-Newton [hereafter AMC-N], S.A. I 100.
- ⁴ Cf. Walter Sawatsky, 'Protestantism in the USSR', in: *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- ⁵ ['Jelebje']
- ⁶ ['Nich Jelebje']
- ⁷ ['Heimat']
- ⁸ ['der rechte Herzensglaube']
- ⁹ Many of the interviewees wished to remain anonymous. People's names, as well as the names of villages in this article, therefore, have been abbreviated. N. is a village in Germany.
- ¹⁰ All subsequent quotations by Jakob P. in this article are cited from the author's interview with Jakob P. on 14.09.2014. Keywords and important vocabulary used by Jakob P. in this interview have all been translated literally.
- ¹¹ H. is a village in Germany, located near the congregation in N.
- ¹² This point is significant because, in terms of registration matters in the Soviet Union, Mennonite congregations had intense arguments about whether registering with the authorities was the right thing to do or not. Back then, these people from the N. congregation (which was originally from K., the village in the Soviet Union where almost every church member in N. came from) had been strictly against a formal registration.
- ¹³ ['Ich bin Christ']
- ¹⁴ [*Between Exit and Exclusion: Exclusion and Alienation from Russian German Evangelical Churches*]
- ¹⁵ ["Zunächst wird von einer kognitiven und sozialen Enge gesprochen, die durch Gefühle der Fremdbestimmung, Selbstentfremdung und Gedankenkontrolle charakterisiert wird. Im Gegensatz zu dieser Ausgangssituation wird dann eine Entwicklung oder eine neue Identität entworfen, die spiegelbildlich diese Konfliktlagen aufhebt. Es zeigen sich also Prozesse der Selbstfindung, Selbstverwirklichung und/oder Selbstbefreiung. Die beengenden Verhältnisse werden demnach zugunsten einer Lebensweise geöffnet, die neue Entwicklungschancen, Selbstverständnisse, Handlungs- und Kontaktmöglichkeiten bereithält. Vorher unüberschreitbare soziale und kognitive Grenzen werden aufgehoben, scheinbar dichotome „Welten“ auf kreative Weise zu einer neuen Seinsweise integriert."]
- ¹⁶ ['No, no, das ist eine Christliche']