

**EXPLORING THE ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY IN  
THE IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCE OF ROMANIAN EVANGELICALS: A  
CRITICAL REALIST PERSPECTIVE**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore intersectionality of Religion/Spirituality and immigration in the experience of Romanian evangelicals in Canada from a Critical Realist perspective. In the first two chapters I provide background information outlining the interconnection between spirituality/religion, social work and immigration and examine the existing body of knowledge of present literature on ways of utilizing relevant concepts, methods, emerging themes and I address some of the implications and critiques pertaining to the literature perused. In the following two chapters I present the theoretical framework of Critical Realism, the methodological approach utilized -Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, and the dual gathering methods employed, semi-structured interviews and poetic inquiry. In the main part of the theses I review the findings and discuss them from a theoretical and practical perspective, concluding with a number of recommendations and observations which, if implemented, would in my opinion effect a more spiritually sensitive practice in working with specific ethno-religious groups.

“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience;  
We are spiritual beings having a human experience”  
- Pierre Teilhard DeChardin

I am in gratitude to my research supervisor, Dr. Stephanie Baker, whose insight, kind assistance and genuine interest, walked me through this lengthy process and created the perfect environment to pursue my research passion. Thank you, Stephanie, for your exceptional suggestions, unending availability and exemplary role model.

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I sincerely appreciate my family for their example, guidance and unconditional love. No words could encompass my gratitude to them. I dedicate this work, especially to my grandparents whose life impacted mine in rich and unfathomable ways. Here, I include also the Nemeti family for their constant support and being my second family here in Canada.

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## Table of Content

Abstract

Acknowledgments

Prologue

Chapter 1: Introduction

*Spirituality and Social Work*

*Spirituality/Religion and Canada*

*Immigration and Spirituality/Religion*

Chapter 2: Literature review

*Conceptualizations of Spirituality/Religion*

*Important concepts*

*Methods used in current literature*

*Identified themes*

*Implications and Critique of literature perused*

*Implications for research and practice*

*Critiques and gaps*

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

*Social Constructivism: Overview and Critique*

*Critical Realist Framework*

Chapter 4: Methodology, methods and research design

*Methodology*

*Methods*

*Research design*

*Recruitment process*

*Interview process*

*Data analysis*

Chapter 5: Demographics of the participants

Chapter 6: Findings

*Romanian Evangelicals Understanding of Spirituality and Religion*

*Dichotomous view of spirituality and religion*

*View of God*

*Experience of spirituality/religion*

*S/R expressed through practices*

*S/R providing meaning and purpose*

*S/R forming identity and life style*

*S/R and important values*

*Immigration and S/R experience*

*Immigration as Spiritual Journey*

*S/R experience as a coping mechanism/enabler in immigration process*

*Challenges faced by evangelical Romanians in immigration experience*

*Language barrier*

*Cultural barrier*

*Socio-psychological issues*

*Canada as representation in collective imaginary of Romanians*

*evangelicals*

*The role of S/R community in the immigration experience*



*Mediating effects of their S/R community in adapting to Canadian context*

*Spiritual*

*Psychological*

*Social*

*Economic*

*Cultural*

*Hindering effects of their S/R community in adapting to Canadian context*

*Acculturative issues*

*Oppressive religious norms and attitudes*

*Gender issues*

*Romanian evangelicals and Social Workers*

*Respect and dignity*

*No predetermined negative assumptions*

*Openness to discuss spiritual aspects*

*Intentional effort to explore and understand their S/R*

*Involving their S/R community or leaders in the helping relationship*

*Advocating for a more holistic approach to human experience and social problems*

*Findings from poetry*

Chapter 7: Discussion

*Theoretical discussion*

*Practical discussion*

*Limitations of the study*

*Implications for practice and research*

Chapter 8: Conclusion

## References

Appendix A – Letter of Information/Consent

Appendix B – Interview Questions

Appendix C – Demographical information Sheet

Appendix D – Table “Dichotomous view of Spirituality and Religion” list of citations

## *Prologue*

The idea of this study was born while I was in one of the classes of my master's studies. A doctoral student was presenting his project about indigenous spirituality and how social work can benefit from incorporating some of its tenets in practice and research methodology. I deeply appreciated his passion and his respect for his tradition; his sense of being part of a larger determinative community; and his desire to "give back". He eloquently spoke about honoring his native spiritual understandings and communal traditions. Introspectively, I began to think of my own formative experiences, tradition and community. Whether it was for better or worse, all of them inevitably had some influence on my personal development and professional choices. Indeed, I would want to honor them as well. In my understanding, giving honor means to appreciate and acknowledge the best of one's tradition, within the parameters of integrity and healthy critical stance.

At this point, I want to introduce and position myself within my project. This is necessary because any text is an exercise of power that ineluctably reproduces invisible normalizations and difference-making, and their inherent hierarchies and power relations. (Davies & Harré, 1990; Fahlgren & Sawyer, 2011; Hearn, 1998). Moreover, acknowledging the fact that there is always the possibility of biases (Kumashiro, 2009 cited in Fahlgren & Sawyer, 2011) when talking about peoples' spiritual and religious experiences, I will make my voice visible as being one of a Romanian immigrant, Eastern European, white, male, theologically trained, middle-aged, middle class person. Religiously and spiritually, I belong to the sub-group of Christianity called Evangelicals. The coalescence of all these particular traits and commitments are ineluctably brought into my study and thus thereby explains why this research is of profound personal

interest to me. It also accounts for the questions that had risen in my mind in that day such as: What does spirituality/religion mean to Romanian Evangelical immigrants? How does this understanding operate in their life in providing meaning and support in their immigration experience? And how can these perspectives get integrated into the social workers' professional interactions with this group in order to serve them in a relevant, effective and sensitive way?

These queries were the starting point of my endeavor. From the onset of my study, I am aware that I'm simultaneously in the best and worst position in tackling this subject matter. Best in the sense that I share the following similar (if not the same) commonalities: first language, experiences (immigration included), ethnicity, socio-cultural-spiritual background and community belongingness; whereas on the other hand, I could be in the worst position as well, because this much "affinity" could be a source of blindness, biases and lack of critique. It is important to note here that this outsider/insider position creates possible opportunities: a better understanding of the respondents' experiences, a greater openness and responsiveness, and access to details that are otherwise deemed unimportant or remain undisclosed. However, looking from another standpoint, there are potential dangers, namely: assumptions of unmediated understanding/ of "shared worlds", reticence in revealing their experiences, fear of breaking confidentiality, shame of not giving the "right" answer. I also acknowledge that the complexity of any research, observed through this lens of "Outsider-Insider" phenomena are more complex than the above-mentioned scenarios, especially as no researcher is absolutely confined on either side of this phenomena, because it is a fact that everybody exhibits several identities at once (Boushel, 2000). I want to close this preliminary observation with the words of Giorgi (1994: 205), "nothing can be accomplished without subjectivity, so its elimination is not the solution. Rather how the subject is presented is what matters, and objectivity itself is an achievement of

subjectivity". In this attitude of critical self-awareness, I shall attempt to remain open to the Other and I will strive to see the world anew.

In closing this prologue, I want to emphasize some of the unique features of this study. It is the first social work exploratory study of the Romanian community, evangelical in particular, in Canadian context. It is one of the few Masters level studies made from a Critical Realist perspective, and similarly one of the very few who uses poetic inquiry.

## *Chapter 1: Introduction*

This introductory chapter will attempt to bring forth the important concepts of my study starting with a general discussion of spirituality and Social Work; to be followed by an exposition of the situation of spirituality/religion in Canada and conclusively correlating immigration to spirituality/religion.

### *Spirituality and Social Work*

The issue of addressing spiritual/religious dimensions in social work has been problematic for many years. This is one of the reasons why some of the sources used in this study seem dated. I would say that this topic is still undeveloped and remains in the margins of research. Even if the focus of our profession is its person-in-environment understanding, the profession of social work has neglected or even unequivocally rejected the spiritual dimensions of people. (Canda, 1997; Sherwood, 2000; Weisman, 1997). Nevertheless, in the recent years, an emerging body of scholars had started addressing this issue (Canda & Furman, 1999; Coholic, 2001 a; Hodge, 2003; Rice, 2002). A strong argument can be made that a more holistic understanding of social work would include a consideration of spiritual and religious dimensions. These dimensions have implications for and are related to ethical considerations and theoretical and/or conceptual frameworks of social work emancipation politics, issues of power and oppression and social justice, client's spiritual perspective, community development, grief and loss issues, culturally sensitive practice, public policy and so on. Social workers need to be aware of and reflect on their religious and spiritual views or "spiritual bias" (Sermabeikan, 1994), just as they do issues of culture, gender and class. By not considering this perspective, this in itself represents a perspective on spirituality which devalues it through omission.

Taking into consideration the writings of some social work theorists (Canda & Furman 1999; Coholic 2001a) who believe that spirituality is not just an act of introspection exclusively, “but is closely interwoven with all other dimensions of human experience including social and political life” (King 1989: 90), this dimension of human experience cannot be arbitrarily excluded from the domain of social sciences' theory and practice, or even more so from social work and immigration studies.

Undoubtedly, the epistemology and ontology of immigration became more sophisticated “than the early neoclassical economics’ linear depiction of an autonomous worker, strategizing personal income under particular structures of constraints and opportunities” (Culic, 2010). They were envisioned in a more ecological perspective as under the larger influences of “capitalism, transnational practices, state policies, and globalizing locales” (Culic, 2010). I would argue that an important addition to this multi-dimensional understanding is the role played by spirituality/religion in dislocation and/or re-location of immigrants and its significance and expressions for their identity formation, migratory grief and coping, socio-spiritual well-being, difficult life transitions, acculturative stress, etc., just to name a few important factors.

### *Spirituality/Religion and Canada*

Alberta sociologist Reg Bibby’s (2002, 2006) research found that the vast majority of Canadians believe in God (86%) and according to Statistics Canada:

Seven out of every 10 Canadians identify themselves as either Roman Catholic or

Protestant, according to new data from the 2001 Census... At the same time, the number of Canadians who were reported to have religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism has increased substantially. Much of the shift in the nation’s religious make-up during the past several decades is the result of the changing sources of immigrants, which has contributed to a more diverse religious profile.

The figures reflect the fact that spirituality/religion (S/R) still maintains an important place in Canadians' lives and, how as a result of immigration the religious national landscape is

reconfigured along the lines of “at least three notable shifts: a) significant changes and declines within mainline Euro-Canadian Christianity; b) a growing tendency to opt out (permanently or temporary) of traditional categories; c) dramatic growth within traditions associated with “visible minority” ethno-religious populations.” (Bramadat, 2005). Contemporary Christianity retains a leading place. One of the reasons is the non-European immigration, with a constant influx for example of: Latino and Filipino Roman Catholics, African Anglicans, Korean Presbyterians, and Chinese Evangelicals. Eastern European Orthodoxy has a small but permanent contribution, too. In other words we can say that Canadian religious landscape reflects immigration patterns.

### *Immigration and Spirituality/Religion*

In regard to issues of immigration and its connection to spirituality, there is a rather scarce body of literature despite rather budding interest in association to literatures in diverse areas as sociology (Menjívar, 2006), gerontology (Lee & Chan, 2009; Paulino, 1998), psychology (Bolsheva, 2006; Eftimie, 2009; Liao, 2008;), social work (Farber et al, 2003; McCarty, 2012), theology (Groody, 2000) and counseling (Nanji, 2007). It is important for different disciplinary voices to triangulate perspectives and results from studies. By doing so, we will have a better picture about present knowledge. However, there are important studies that researched the confluence of S/R and immigration in relation with acculturative stress, well-being and religious coping (Sanchez et al, 2012; Sharp, 2010), social support and life satisfaction (Park, Roh, & Yeo, 2012), immigrants' economic adaptation and incorporation (Connor, 2011), and faith-based assistance to contemporary immigrants (Menjívar, 2006).

As evident by above presented information and literature; in spite of rising interest that led to some rather promising research on spirituality in connection with sociology and other



related studies that impacts SW, there remains a vast territory of unexplored terrain to be incorporated in our theoretical and practice frameworks.

## Chapter 2: **Literature Review: Analysis and Critique**

In this chapter, some literature that is relevant to the subject of this research will be discussed to provide some context to this paper. Initially, important conceptualizations of S/R shall be presented. This shall be followed by a discussion of important concepts, methods used in current literature and identified themes. The last section of the chapter will address the issue of implications and some critiques to the literature perused.

### *Conceptualizations of Spirituality/Religion*

S/R is a unique and complex topic, which is controversial and difficult to grasp because it brings into the discussion inherently multidimensional constructs, which play multifaceted roles in human experience. It brings an array of meanings that are neither tangible nor patent, involving private and public aspects (“the spiritual is personal and political” - King 1989: 206), which is difficult to attempt to describe and depict with the limitations of language. The disparity between understandings of spirituality and religion add to the difficulty of the matter. While the exact relationship between spirituality and religion is contested, they could be distinguished from each other. Spirituality/Religion seems to be economically and politically marginalized in Western society and a number of factors contributed to this (ex: secularization, scientism, capitalism) (Canda & Furman, 2010).

Contemporary scholars differentiate religiosity from spirituality but often find that people associate spirituality with religiosity and uses the two terms interchangeably (Nelson-Becker, 2005). Conceptualizations of religiosity and spirituality are complicated and often times the terms of the conversation overlaps, even though they do not become isomorphs. In the current literature, spirituality refers to an essential quality of human beings and human processes that

involve seeking the meaning and purpose of life (Canda & Furman, 2010). The construct of spirituality is related to morality and values of the human being, a sense of transcendence and connectedness to others or the universe, and other transpersonal experiences that are not necessarily related to a certain religion (Best & Kellner, 1991; Canda & Furman, 2010). The following table helps to define the difference between spirituality and religion as adapted from the work of Jack Hawley (cited in McKernan, 2005):

<b>Religion</b>	<b>Spirituality</b>
Product of a certain time or place	Broadly inclusive of many eras and traditions
Meant for a group	More private, personal
Focus more on prescribed beliefs	Contains elements common to all religions
Codes of conduct	Methods of practice
A system of thought	A body of practice
A set of beliefs, to move along the path	A state beyond the senses (beyond even thought)
Institutions and organizations	Networks of like minded seekers
A way of life	A practice

Hawley’s conceptualization is quite functional and seems to echo the classic authors. Allport and Ross (1967) argued that people can live with both personally and socially oriented religiosity and proposed two types of religiosity: intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity. These authors suggested that intrinsic religiosity involves internal spiritual beliefs, general attitudes or values toward religion and spirituality, or other religious and spiritual practices that are personal. In contrast, people with extrinsic religiosity consider religion as “an instrumental

means to solace and sociability ” that involves religious membership, social activities, or preference for their own religion ( Allport & Ross, 1967 :32).

### ***Important concepts***

The most important concepts employed were those of:

“*Spirituality and religion*” that were already presented, but also “spiritual development” (Groody, 2000; Kim, 2008) – by which spirituality is conceptualized as a dynamic reality of human life; as a possibility to grow in relation to God, to others and to ourselves.

“*S/R as resource and as coping mechanism*” (Paz, 2004) – this in almost all literature is regarded as something positive. Nevertheless, there are also welcomed warnings not to reduce S/R to this functional aspect.

“*Spiritual-well being*” (Sharp, 2011; Bolsheva, 2006) – as an indication of spiritual health with ramifications and effects in all spheres of human experience, personal, social, even political.

“*Bicultural acculturation*” as an index of identity (Eftimie, 2009; Hovhannessian, 2009) -acculturation entails the negotiation of the degree of immersion in the host culture and the degree of immersion in the native culture resulting in four acculturative positions: assimilation, integration, separation, marginalization (Berry, 1980; 1997, cited in Hovhannessian, A., 2009). Acculturation was considered a bilinear process which means that change can occur within the culture of origin and within the host culture.

### ***Methods used in current literature***

It is also important to note the plethora of research methods utilized: historical, theoretical, quantitative – survey, experimental, quasi-experimental (Farber et al, 2003); qualitative individual and group interviews (Groody, 2000; Lee & Chan, 2009), case studies

(Bolsheva, 2006; Hovhannessian, 2009), narrative (Doan, 2011), ethnographic (McConatha, & Stoller, 2006), guided autobiography (Kim, 2008), heuristic (Eftimie, 2009), phenomenological-hermeneutical inquiry (Garrido, 2010); and integrative- grounded theory (Coholic, 2001 b), integral research methods (Sharp, 2010). All these kinds of methods are reflected in the literature. The qualitative method is more prevalent as it is better suited for in-depth exploration of participants' viewpoints, values and practices, and the relationships between beliefs and behaviors.

### ***Identified themes***

A few themes were identified in the findings of my reviewed literature.

First, spirituality/religion was envisioned as coping mechanism (Sanchez et al, 2012; Sharp, 2010), as a way of dealing with acculturative stress. In this perspective spirituality acts like a resource. Religious coping can be defined as “the use of cognitive and behavioral techniques, in the face of stressful life events, that arise out of one’s religion or spirituality” (Tix & Frazier, 1998: 411). Furthermore, religious coping styles have been found to be better predictors of mental health outcomes of stressful situations, as the immigration process can be, than measures of religiosity alone (e.g., frequency of church attendance, involvement in church-related activities, frequency of prayer etc.) (Sanchez et al, 2012)

A second theme was the role of spiritual resilience in the crises experience and in the dynamics of immigration, or what Paz (2004) would call “spirituality of trauma”. Resilience was described as “the capacity to rebound from adversity,...an active process of endurance, self-righting, and growth out of crisis or persistent life challenges, ...[is what] enables people to heal from wounds, take charge of their lives, and go on to live and love fully’ (Walsh, 1999:36 cited in Paz, 2004). Walsh continues her argument to show that through spiritual belief and practices

individuals are able to “withstand and transcend” (Walsh, 1999:36 cited in Paz, 2004) the adversities of daily life. She also argues that one’s spiritual development reinforce key elements of resilience such as meaning-making, hope, courage, perseverance and connectedness. (Walsh, 1999, cited in Paz, 2004).The strength-based perspective may help researchers to understand the reciprocal nature in the relation of “*spirituality*” and “*resilience*”, as well as multiple systemic factors that can be critical resources within a community (Paz, 2004). Critical in this process is the individual’s resilience, which can be derived from the active cognitive effort of creating belief and thinking in the person’s internal schema around possibility and the value inherent in the external environment. Current research seems to indicate that resilience is inherent in most people. Also it indicates that where individuals have the possibility to “benefit from difficulty by developing new and better adaptive strategies” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999: 158), post-traumatic growth can occur. These count as positive lessons of loss through which people develop new and more adapted ways of dealing with change or crises.

A third theme is the role of religious affiliation and participation in faith communities into mediating adaptation in a new country (Connor, 2011; Sanchez et al, 2012) in helping to rebound from dramatic loss of valuable resources, soon after immigration; in providing networks of support and access to counseling from church or religious leaders; also in offering a large variety of activity and practical help for the immigrants, helping them to adapt and integrate.

Fourth is the role of ethnic immigrant spirituality in transitioning successfully to a new context (Menjivar, 2006; Park, Roh, & Yeo, 2012). Religious services, held in the respective faith communities serve a vital community function. This may be because these services provide not only a place to worship in their native language but also a source of familiar ethnic

foods, community information in the immigrants' native language, psychological and instrumental support for newcomers who need health care, housing, and jobs (Stodghill & Bower, 2002).

The fifth theme is identity formation and development in the process of bicultural acculturation with the help of spirituality and religion (Paulino, 1998). Spirituality is identified as an important factor in identity formation and in helping acculturation in the original and hosting culture. "Lack of appropriate integration of valuable culturally specific information places the immigrant family at risk of being misdiagnosed and inappropriately served". (Paulino, 1998: 62).

Last, but not least, is the theme of professional integration of spiritually sensitive practices and future development of spiritually influenced models and frameworks and direct curriculum development (Miller, 1999). This kind of framework can provide a more holistic approach to social problems and can improve social workers interactions with their clients in helping them to integrate client's own spiritual understandings and resources, spiritual traditions and communities in the assistive interventions aimed alleviate their social problems.

### ***Implications and Critique of literature perused***

#### *Implications for research and practice*

As previously mentioned immigration is a complex social, cultural and political process (Culic, 2010). Historically, social workers have been instrumental in assisting immigrants' transition into receiving countries. For many of them, S/R represents a valuable resource in facing the hardships of separation from family and friends, the loss of a homeland, the struggles of acculturation, of transitioning and adapting to a foreign context. It also provides to them an important social venue to connect with other people from similar ethnic backgrounds, a place to

worship in their native language, a source of familiar ethnic foods, traditions; community information in the immigrants' native language and psychological and instrumental support for newcomers who need health care, housing, and jobs (Park, Roh, & Yeo, 2012).

A better understanding of the significance and role of S/R is invaluable not only from a theoretical standpoint, but even more important for practice, especially related to service delivery. Social workers should enhance their skills in navigating religious and/or spiritual issues in dealing with immigration, as well as clinical processes. For this to happen we need to have an openness and willingness to understand the client's religion/ spirituality. This includes some familiarity with culturally related values, beliefs, and practices that are common among the client populations that are likely to be served (Miller, 1999); being comfortable in asking and talking about religious/spiritual issues with clients and showing willingness to seek information from appropriate professionals and coordinate care concerning clients' religious/spiritual traditions .

#### *Critiques and gaps*

The first concern regards the appropriateness of spirituality as a topic of interest in social work and immigration studies. One important issue is the conceptual inconsistency of important constructs of the debate. Regarding S/R, it can be pointed out that there is little definitional congruence among authors and as result, noetic unity is difficult to achieve (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). An additional argument appears most often in the form of concern about the violation of ethical principles when providers intentionally interact with clients about their religion or spirituality (Moberg, 2002). Some helping professionals are concerned in their writings with the issue of blurring professional and personal boundaries and rightfully wonder whether this kind of interaction could lead to proselytizing and they even worry that their practice or research could



be deemed as “unprofessional” if references to S/R are made in their work (Coates & Graham, 2004).

Another concern is linked to the lack of empirical knowledge in this emergent field, since the abstract and experiential nature of spirituality makes it difficult to study spiritually influenced processes from a dominant positivist research paradigm (Sanchez at al, 2012). This paradigm is visible from the burgeoning quantitative research entrenched in a specific discourse that seeks legitimacy in an objective, detached, “sanitized” language (“culturally competent”, “psychometrically appropriate measures”; “trained/experienced interviewers”; “well-adapted questionnaires” , “resulted in participant satisfaction”; “providing more accurate data” (Sanchez at al, 2012).

Considering these critiques, we can point out that religiosity and spirituality, however defined, are latent and multi-dimensional, as any highly abstract phenomenon or construct. Latency entails that the construct be observed through indicators that are not in and of themselves equivalent to the construct, multi-dimensionality on the other hand, requires that dimensions composing the construct of interest be identified because the construct is sufficiently complex to be unidentifiable by any one dimension (Pargament, 2002). Until now, most of the quantitative research has focused primarily on four dimensions: public participation (e.g., attendance at religious services), religious affiliation (e.g., religious group or denominational affiliation), private religious practices (e.g., prayer, reading of religious material), and religious coping ( Pargament, 2002; Pergament at al, 1998 – for an excellent discussion of *positive* and *negative* religious coping).

One of the most important gaps that was obvious in reviewing the literature at hand had to do with the limited amount of qualitative research. My observation here is that this is quite unexpected, especially because both “immigration” and “S/R” are experiential realities. Both are phenomena about which we can learn from self-reported accounts or lived experiences.

In the literature perusal completed by the author of this article, another gap was the total lack of art-based methods in researching immigration and S/R. This kind of research can be very revealing as both phenomena render themselves as perfect candidates for artistic expressions of diverse contours.

As a response to these gaps, my study is derived from a qualitative perspective aiming to explore self-reported dimensions of S/R with their role and impact in immigrant’s experience of transitioning and adapting to foreign context, in order to examine new and creative ways of integrating their understandings into social work practice to provide culturally relevant and spiritually sensitive services.

### **Chapter 3: Theoretical framework**

This chapter will present the theoretical framework of my study and will proceed with an overview and critique of the non-realist theoretical assumptions of Social Constructionism especially in its more radical variety, pointing out some of its insufficiencies. As an alternative, I will propose and use the meta-theoretical framework of Critical Realism .

My research aims to explore the role and significance of Religion/Spirituality in the immigration experience of a particular group, namely, Romanian Evangelicals. Exploring from the perspective of accounts of perceived reality and self-understandings of two correlated multi-dimensional experiences with a high degree of complexity of phenomena and interpretative constructs, the question of theoretical framework is fundamental in orienting the whole endeavor.

My study is based on a critical realist perspective which offers me a “third way” between positivism and constructionism; an alternative strategy for investigating immigration and spirituality as social phenomena. It provides me with an alternative mode of reasoning and a set of developed concepts which may be utilized in crafting descriptions and explanations of social phenomena harmonized with my research concern.

Before presenting the critical realist framework, I want to make visible my personal journey of how I came to see it as a suitable alternative to social constructivism, especially because this quest was more than significant not only for selecting a methodology for my study, but more importantly, as a general framework for my personal life and professional practice and understanding.

## **Social Constructionism: Overview and Critique**

The eminence of SC in social sciences (implicitly in Social Work) can be accounted for as a reflection of deep societal and epistemological changes: a continuous critique, incredulity and distrust of Enlightenment/Modernity project of triumphalist progress anchored in an unsubstantiated belief in human rationality and its expression in positivistic or idealistic worldviews and theoretical constructions (Bauman, 1992; Habermas, 1987; Kuhn, 1970; Lyotard, 1984; Popper 1959; Rorty, 1979) the emerging power of new social movements to (re)delineate the social world (Giddens 1990); and the inadequacy of “hermeneutics” to explain the inner workings of power in conveying signification and interpretation (Gadamer, 1994; Habermas, 1978).

Social Constructionism (SC) is hard to encompass and describe because it is not just a theory but a meta-theory, or a philosophy of social science, and as such is compatible with a number of substantive theoretical positions. Therefore, due to its polymorphic aspect, it is hard to reduce to an exclusive single description, as doing so would result in losing its basic epiphenomenal facet and there will be always a number of positions that remain outside the said “description”. Following Burr’s (2003) presentation of “things you would absolutely have to believe in order to be a social constructionist”, these are: a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge, historical and cultural specificity, knowledge sustained (constructed) by social processes, and interconnectivity of knowledge and social action. (Burr, 2003: 2-5). In exploring the fundamental tenets of SC, she also points out the important differences between what she calls “traditional” social science (in this case with reference to psychology) and SC. The main differences consist in a radical suspicion regarding the objective nature of reality and our possibility to have a direct perception of it – we have access only to perspectival and

contingent versions of reality dictated by socially vested interests (Lyotard, 1984). This basic position leads to the others designated as: anti-essentialism – no “given” nature of the world or social reality and advance of differences of the above categories; historical and cultural specificity of knowledge; pre-condition of language as a “socio-symbolic order” (Noble, 2004) and its performative bearing over human behavior and social reality; and lastly, a focus on processes/dynamics of social interaction (as opposed to underling structures). (Burr, 2003). It was Lyotard (1984) with his notion of incredulity towards overarching *métanarrations*; Saussure with his emphasis on the origin of meaning within underling system of linguistic and social conventions; and Foucault (1976, 1980) employing the concept of *régimes de vérité* which contributed massively in crystallizing the profound distrust in any possibility of an epistemological and/or ontological certainty, and who disrupted the idea of an *a priori* self-contained being, a self who is the inheritor of sense and meaning, for a large part of contemporary critical theory and practice. Similarly, others suggest that under postmodernism, the blurred boundaries of the individual as a unit of reality almost disipate, and argue for “relational relatitivities” (Gerden, 1991).

It is also important to note the important contribution and deeply manifested interest that SC’s had in bringing forth the voices of the marginalized and silenced. This impetus has to be preserved and its impulse continued and integrated at the heart of our profession. Dislocating ossified categories that often times were oppressive and bringing forth overlooked histories, it created a space in which justice for the silenced ones could be fostered . Likewise, considering the positivist, Enlightenment based separation between fact and value which resulted in an almost impossible context for meaningful communication between religion and science, SC’s relentless critique opened fresh and new avenues for fruitful dialog.

Still, as a social worker, evaluating SC effects on our profession, I could say along with others before me, that looking to reality and social issues through SC lenses - “life is experienced as endangered” (Noble, 2004: 291). Reality and its inherent social problems is reduced to a plethora of conceptual frameworks and any attempted hermeneutic of it leads to a form of intertextuality dependent on the diverse “interpreting communities” (Berger, & Luckmann 1966; Fish 1989; Kuhn, 1970) found within each culture and locality. As a result, these interpretations can be (and often times are) considerably different, even contradictory. Social reality becomes an arena of dueling texts, in which the individual is subjected to ungrounded “language/power games” (Lyotard, 1984) in a way that any social “text” is the absorption and transformation of another.

I am also concerned with the manner in which the justice intent of social work can become subverted by SC relentless attack and devaluation of social work professional project and traditional values. This opens a dangerous door that could result in passivity, pessimism, and lack of involvement at a personal and structural level. In my perspective, SC undermines our professional heritage and discredits it by not recognizing its humanitarian, emancipating and progressive intent. It dissolves its professional identity by subverting its epistemological and praxis possibilities; SC’s inherent agnostic stance, especially in its radical postmodern variant, manifests a nihilistic proclivity toward dismissing enduring structural social phenomena, and this in itself, has latent destructive power for our profession. I am also disquieted not only with the way this perspective deforms social work’s self-understanding but also with its apparent predisposition to be instrumentalized by dominant oppressive agents (e.g. neoliberal’ agenda and interests (Noble, 2004)). In a final analysis, if pushed to the limits, even the fundamental

concepts of social justice and transformative action can be rendered insignificant and difficult to uphold under a radical SC perspective.

Distinguishing all these inherent problems with SC, I'd like to reiterate my acknowledgement of some of the positive aspects that this theoretical framework added to my professional understanding. For starters, naïveté in my working relationships (and any kind of inter-subjective relationships) is no longer possible. There is no place for innocence anymore. There never was. Power's inner workings and mechanism are ubiquitous. Imbalance is ineluctable. Its shadowing influence is ever-present not only in my personal dealings with my clients, but it also operates in our life through what Foucault called processes of governmentality and regimes of discipline. Then, SC disrupts me. I regard this as a gain, as a necessity. This opened up spaces of creativity and dialog between me and all the people I interact with in my practice. We are bringing ourselves in our encounter, with our histories, knowledge and internalized discourse. It provides me a fresh understanding of the imperative of exercising critical reflexivity in our interactions at all times. But there is another set of awareness that CS makes possible. It brings into perspective the kaleidoscopic aspects of professional rhetoric and the way it forms and informs my practice; it raises multifarious ethical concerns, and makes me aware that to any social artifact, any oppressive ideology or practice are inexhaustible alternatives.

### **Critical Realist Framework**

After examining SC metatheory and rejecting it as an adequate foundation for my practice and research, I was left with an important question: What other possibility is there? Going back to the positivistic way of understanding the social reality looks as unappealing as

being entrenched in SC relativism. Troubled, I started by writing down some of my essential beliefs like: (1) *there is “something” objective independent of my mind or my cultural constructions and heritage* (this not just on individual level, but on collective level, too). For example, the existence of systematic inequalities within the socio-political sphere does not depend on my knowing about their existence. (2) *There is order in this world, recognizing patterns/processes that can be observed, learned about and applied to my practice*. For example, relations of power even if obscured, can be inferred to exist from their effects in social work, as are those of class conflict, gender and racial inequalities, exploitation and dominion. (3) *Human agency has to be promoted and flourished* –human beings are inherently important. *Structure precedes action* – this not only applies to natural world but to social phenomena as well. For instance, social institutions as the family, religion, education, work and law pre-existed our birth and are relatively enduring. These institutions constrain and enable social action (this is not to be understood as this institution are impermeable to change; on the contrary, this change is still encompassed in the “framework” of structures). I realized that if I am to replace SC, it has to be substituted with another meta-theoretical framework that has an equal explanatory power as this one. I also wanted one that could retain the positive aspects of positivism and social constructivism, and at the same time, to circumvent the difficulties identified in both. In short I wanted a synthesis that could offer appropriate conceptual and theoretical architecture; a matrix for ethical choices, forms of social analyses and modes of generating and evaluating empirical evidence. I discovered that Critical Realism (CR) looks promising and could respond to all of these exigencies.

Emerging from Roy Bhaskar’s groundbreaking work – *A Realist Theory of Science* (1978), and *The possibility of naturalism* (1989), Critical Realism (CR) supports the position that



“although knowledge is inevitably biased and social constructed, there is a mind-independent reality to be known” (Bhaskar, 1989, cited in Tyson, 1992: 551). Bhaskar’s response to positivist and constructivist positions is to change the terrain of the debate about the nature of science and how the social sciences can produce valid knowledge. He starts with the fact that historically speaking, there had been successful scientific practice that reflects on the very possibility of science. He makes an important distinction between the two sides of scientific knowledge. First, science as a social, interpretative product; and second, science as knowledge “of” things which are not produced by humans at all (ex. the specific velocity of light, the processes of electrolysis, etc.). These objects of knowledge do not “depend upon human activity, for if human beings ceased to exist, sound would continue to travel and heavy bodies fall to the earth in exact same way although there would be no one to know it”. (Bhaskar 1978: 21). Bhaskar’s intention is to preserve the subjective, epistemological, or in his conception “transitive” side of knowledge in the same time with the objective, ontological or “intransitive” aspect. (Longhofer & Floersch, 2012; Mantysaari; 2005).

The Bhaskarian hybrid framework allows for an authentic encounter with reality-in-itself but on the condition of recognizing it as dependent on a tradition-constituted rationality. This perspective conflates an ontological realism with an epistemological relativism, better termed epistemological fallibilism, which recognizes the power of social context and the role it has in shaping knowledge and reality. However, it maintains that an independent reality does exist apart from our view of it. Asserting an ontological “depth” to reality, Baskar developed a theory of science in which reality is presented as emerging hierarchically ordered in three **strata/levels of emergence** and **differentiated structure**. (1) A *real/casual strata* – of “generative

mechanisms” of events; (2) *an actual strata*- comprising all events whether experienced or not; (3) *an empirical strata* – of experienced events (Baskhar R. 1978; 1989).

The concept of “**open systems**” with which Critical Realism operates is also very important. It is employed to explicate the emergent processes of casual mechanisms in the natural world, in which operate a variety of heterogeneous systems, each with their own distinct mechanisms. The interdependency and interaction of these systems makes it difficult for us to anticipate the outcomes of any experiment or intervention. Mechanisms produce “tendencies” that can be investigated and explained. In other words there is an ontological distinction between the intransitive powers of structures and mechanism (level 1). These will only be activated and effective under specific conditions and which, while they could be potentially activated, may not be so or may be effective under other conditions -no linear determinism. At the next level (2) are the events of phenomena which were actually produced, and lastly the small subset of these experienced by human beings (level 3). This object/phenomenon, at the casual level, can exist and act quite independently of human beings. Also, any attempts to comprehend these intransitive causal powers and mechanisms largely depends on antecedent social products involving human practices informed by socio-historical located type of understanding, and on the activation of the powers of at least some intransitive objects/phenomena. These forms of knowledge may prove more or less adequate to their object and are always subject to revision. As such, “casual laws must be analyzed as the tendencies of things, which may be possessed unexercised and exercised unrealized, just as they may of course be realized unperceived” (Bhaskar, 1989: 9-10).

Right from the start, CR assumes incidental distortion in interpretation or perception, which is unlike positivistic “correspondence theory of truths”. In other words, I, and my co-

participants in this research, as all human beings, are fallible – we can never arrive at the end of the journey and have flawless/consummated/absolute schema of the world. It's a journey that never ends. We can but attain approximate and transitive perspectives of reality. This is counter balanced by the fact that there are structures, mechanism and tendencies in relation to conditions of living, constitutive constraints and persistent debilitating effects of ideology within society, all of which has an important influence on the way we approach and understand reality – our intransitive world. CR confronts us with this dialectical tension entailing fallibility and the permanent recognition of relative knowledge and asks us to exercise permanent critical reflexivity and skepticism within social sciences. This reluctance is grounded on the recognition of our constructions as being theory laden and mediated by the lenses of culture, language and experience (Philips, 1987).

The preceding specific concepts of Critical Realism discussed opens up the possibility for a non-reductivist and non-positivistic account of causal explanation in the human and social domain. There has been a proliferation of realist positions in philosophy and the social science, but for my research, it is significant one branch, termed by some theoreticians of this methodology as Transcendental Realism (Bhaskar, 1978; Archer, Collier, Porpora, 2004). In fact, Bhaskar introduced the term TR to the academic scene. Transcendental refers to the preconditions for human activity which lie beyond the immediately accessible, experiential domain. The term realism denotes the independence of these preconditions from our knowledge of them (Danermark et al., 2002). TR is particularly congruent with research dealing with issues of Spirituality/Religion and their corresponding relevance and significance for the immigration experience. It allows for the accounts of participants to be understood as encounters with transcendental realities, which can have transformative effects in people's lives, by enriching

them with new meanings and hopes, especially in moments of crises, or important life transitions as immigrating to a new country proves to be. This type of CR also agrees that understandings of social actors' perspectives, meanings and mental concepts refer to real entities. Affects, beliefs, values and so on are part of reality; they are not simply abstractions from behavior or epiphenomena of brain states. It also creates a vital balance between agency and structure. Thus, from CR standpoint, it will be important to follow not only reports of the experiences, but also how existing structures are produced and reproduced. As example, the participants in the research might bring up existing socio-political-religious structures and cultural institutions that influenced their immigration experience, and played a role in their eventual decisions.

## Chapter 4: **Methodology, methods and research design**

In this chapter the analytical methodology of the research will be presented, accompanied by an exposition of the data gathering methods and the research design.

### **Methodology**

This study aims to understand the significance and role that spirituality and religion play in the immigration experience and in doing so to enhance social workers working relationships with a particular group, Romanian evangelicals. Dealing with human experiences, the phenomenological methodology recommended itself as the best approach. Phenomenology is the study of lived, human phenomena, within everyday social contexts, in which the phenomena occur from the perspective of those who experienced them. To be more precise, in analyzing data, I will use the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a CR method (Shaw R., 2010), which understands people's experiences as having a real referent, and acknowledges that our access to them is always mediated through particular lens (ex. The particular perspective of the person describing the event at a particular place and time, in a socially, culturally, politically, economically, and religiously contextualized situation). IPA characteristically begins with concrete first-person accounts of lived circumstances in everyday language. It aims to capture the insider's perspective (Ashworth, 2003, 2006), his/her particular meanings attributed to those experiences, states, events, with the awareness that these are never direct or complete (Smith & Sbon, 2008).

Another important characteristic of IPA is that it involves a dynamic process of a double hermeneutic, as sense-making by participant and researcher is involved in the research process. The researcher proceeds to analyze the participant's descriptions ideographically and then arrives

at synthesized accounts by identifying and clustering general themes about the essence of the phenomenon (Smith & Osbon, 2008).

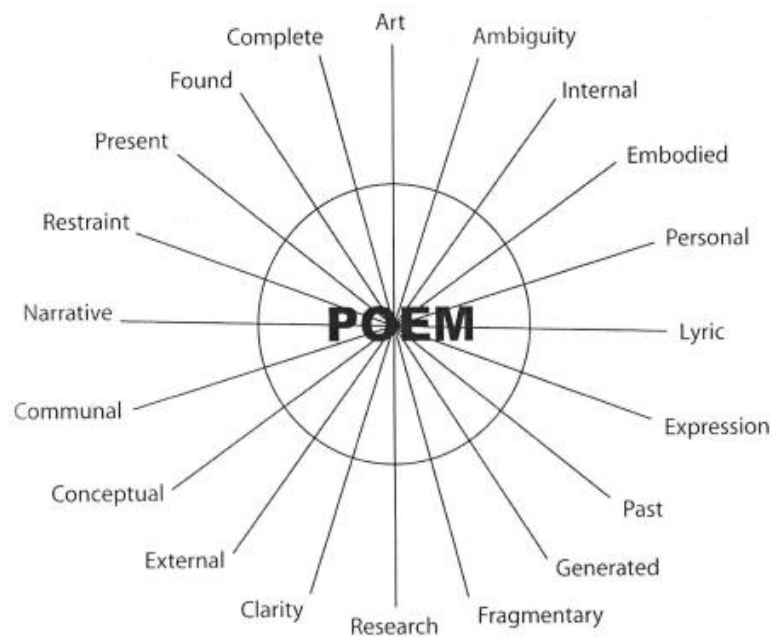
Though some phenomenologists sustain a more systematic, methodical, general and critical - *scientific* method (Giorgi, 1997), others endorse *art-based* approaches that preserve their concrete, sensed, mooded and imaginative nature (e.g. embodied lifeworld approach - Todres, 2000, 2007). As van Manen (1990: 3) stated: “Phenomenology, not unlike poetry is a poetizing project; it tries an incantative, evocative speaking, a primal telling, wherein we aim to involve the voice in an original singing of the world”. This openness of IPA recommended it for my study, allowing me to use not only its exemplary method of semi-structured interview for gathering data, but also the poetic inquiry method.

## **Methods**

I conducted phenomenological semi-structured interviews for capturing the direct, in the moment responses of my participants and, I also invited them to write a short poem to express their interrelated experiences of immigration and spirituality/religion. This is to facilitate more fluid expression of their emotions that might not always be easily expressed in a straight-forward or linear fashion. “Poetry aims to express, by means of language precisely that which language is powerless to express” (Valery, 1971: 429). The compressed nature of the poem forces the author to make decisions about what is essential, and as a form of reflective narrative reveals additional layers of meaning.

The poetic inquiry was included because poetry has an unparalleled facility to clarify and expand human experience and par excellence spiritual/religious experiences. The expressiveness of poetry can expand understanding and present subtle ideas that might even be paradoxical or

dialectic, and lend themselves to the expression of that which is difficult to reduce. It can bring forth the depth and authenticity of what we might call: ineffable, sublime, transcendental; it can capture subtle nuances of affective, moral and spiritual experiential domain (Prendergast, 2009 a). Prendergast uses *poetic inquiry* as an encompassing terminology that covers a multitude of art-based approaches which hint to the “hybridity and heteroglossia” (Prendergast, 2009 b: xx) encountered in this field of research and define it as the “process of intuitively sorting out word, phrases, sentences, passages that synthesize meaning from the prose” (Prendergast, 2009 b: xxiii). This process is understood as a reflective one and metaphorical, narrative and affective in its nature. I choose to use this methodology because of its reflective, non formulaic, non reductive, spontaneous, imagistic, transporting, authentic and resonant with emotion and experience character of the poetic endeavor. It also aims to uncover the inherent tensions and complex architecture of my respondents’ interpretations of their spiritual understandings and its nexus with the immigration experience. Some of the intrinsic tensions of a poem are beautifully represented in Sullivan’s (2009: 123) diagrammatic representation:



## **Research design**

### *Recruitment process*

The population of interest for this study was very specific in terms of ethnicity and religious affiliations. Eligible participants had to be adults at the time of interview (age range - 18 to 65) and belonged to a Romanian Evangelical denomination. This focus dictated that the recruitment process had to be executed in relevant ethno-religious communities specifically: two Baptist, one Pentecostal and one non-denominational Romanian evangelical churches from three cities (Hamilton, Kitchener and Toronto). The pastors of each church were contacted and requested permission to display posters (Appendix D) in their churches. Consequently, they also granted me the opportunity to have a short public presentation of my research. As a result, seven respondents contacted me, asking for more information and after providing them with a Letter of information (Appendix A); a copy of the interview questions (Appendix B); and a Demographical information/ Poem sheet (Appendix C) they agreed to participate. As part of the initial screening, candidates were contacted by phone to clarify any questions they had, and at the same time, to explain the purpose of the study and to assure them of the confidentiality of information offered during the interview and to discuss a mutually convenient place and time for the interview. Most of the respondents preferred a home environment for their interview, but two of them chose public places (a quiet place in a mall, and a church building) and one chose a work environment (in office).

### *Interview process*

Interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis and commenced with the researcher reviewing the purpose of the study; followed by explaining the process of the interview; reiterating the issues of confidentiality; asking permission for recording and emphasizing the



voluntary character of the participation in the study by making sure that each participant understood that withdrawal or opting not to respond to some question/s is a viable option. It was explained to each participant that their anonymity will be preserved by all means all throughout the written documentary, which encompasses periods from transcribing to the publication of the theses. Consonant pseudonyms were utilized to facilitate reading of the paper both for English speaking or Romanian speaking lectors. Afterwards, each participant was asked to read and sign the consent form (Appendix A) and the ones that did not have the poem written at the time of the interview were reminded that they could send the Demographical/Poem Sheet (Appendix C) upon availability. Participants had also the opportunity to choose their preferred language for the interview, to ask to review any direct citation of their words, and to receive a summary of the study's results.

During the interviews, participants were asked to respond to the prepared questions and any follow up questions intended to clarify or expound the depth of their voluntary answers. The semi-structured format of the interview allowed the respondents to speak about the facets of the research significant to their experience, but only within the focus area of interest set by the interview guide (Padgett, 2001).

Prior to the initiation of this research project, approval was granted by the McMaster University Ethics Board (Appendix D).

### *Data analysis*

As an idiographic method – related to the study of the individual, a commitment to ongoing reflection was maintained throughout the analytic process. A reflective diary was kept for registering ad-hoc notes, key extracts and themes identified for each appropriate stage of analysis, and for creating an audit trail aiming to increase the transparency and trustworthiness of

the research. The important junctures of the analysis were: *familiarizing with the data* – at least two initial readings of the transcripts accompanied by writing initial reflections in the diary; *identifying initial themes* by writing descriptive summaries and making initial interpretations; *clustering themes* and subordinating them to central concepts in order to develop a coherent understanding of the topic under examination (Shaw R., 2010).

Treating poems as text and using the same coding methods, a similar process of familiarizing with its contents, identifying and clustering important themes and interpreting, was engaged in analyzing the poems (Furman R., 2006).

## Chapter 5: **Demographics of the participants**

### Participant 1: **Daniela**

- 1) Gender: Female
- 2) Age: 38
- 3) Educational Background: College Diploma - Electronics
- 4) Professional Background: Professional designation by ASQ (American Society for Quality): Certified Quality Engineer (CQE), Certified Reliability Engineer (CRE)
- 5) Spiritual/Religious affiliation: Romanian Pentecostal Church of God
- 6) How long ago did you arrive in Canada: 22 years

### Participant 2: **Andreea**

- 1) Gender: Female
- 2) Age: 31
- 3) Educational Background: College -Human Resources Management
- 4) Professional Background: Human Resources
- 5) Spiritual/Religious affiliation: non-denominational
- 6) How long ago did you arrive in Canada: 17 years

### Participant 3: **Amanda**

- 1) Gender: Female
- 2) Age: 33
- 3) Educational Background: Bachelor in Journalism
- 4) Professional Background: Financial planner, Chartered Investment Manager
- 5) Spiritual/Religious affiliation: Baptist
- 6) How long ago did you arrive in Canada: 7.5 Years ago

### Participant 4: **Laura**

- 1) Gender: Female
- 2) Age: 33

- 3) Educational Background: Master's degree in Theology and Communication; Bachelor in Social Work
- 4) Professional Background: Social Work and Human Resources
- 5) Spiritual/Religious affiliation: Catholic Church and Baptist
- 6) How long ago did you arrive in Canada: more than a year ago

Participants 5: **Victor**

- 1) Gender: Male
- 2) Age: 35
- 3) Educational Background: Auto Industry Diploma
- 4) Professional Background: hardwood floor installer/ self employed
- 5) Spiritual/Religious affiliation: Baptist
- 6) How long ago did you arrive in Canada: 15 years

Participant 6: **George**

- 1) Gender: male
- 2) Age: 31
- 3) Educational Background: Mechanical Engineering – Robotics & Automation
- 4) Professional Background: Tooling Engineer
- 5) Spiritual/Religious affiliation: Christian – nondenominational
- 6) How long ago did you arrive in Canada: 13 years ago

Participant 7: **Paul**

- 1) Gender: Male
- 2) Age: 43
- 3) Educational Background: European Studies Faculty- International Politics, Masters
- 4) Professional Background: Political analyst
- 5) Spiritual/Religious affiliation: Pentecostal
- 6) How long ago did you arrive in Canada: 6 years ago

## Chapter 6: **Findings**

In this chapter I will present the following themes as resulting from the data: the Romanian evangelicals' understanding of their own spirituality and religion; their practical expression of those understandings; the role played by their S/R community in their immigration process including the mediating and hindering effects; and their vision of a healthy relationship with the helping professionals. Because similar themes were encountered in the poems sent by the participants, I will use, when appropriate, relevant segments to illustrate the themes presented here, and by the end of this chapter, a short exposition of specific themes emerging from the aforementioned poems shall be exhibited.

However, before anything else the issue of language has to be addressed. The respondents used theologically charged concepts in answering my questions. As for any other group a specific discursive language, an in-group manner of speaking has developed over time and especially when addressing issues related to spirituality and religion this language becomes visible. This kind of language is easily understood by members of a religious/spiritual community but may be puzzling or even jarring to those on the outside without access to this language or its meaning. I mention this aspect, not only to raise awareness of this matter of fact, but also as a concern for the discomfort the reader could feel reading the responses.

### **Romanian Evangelicals Understanding of Spirituality and Religion**

The majority of respondents understand spirituality and religion as being conceptually different and only one of them view them as overlapping. This being said, there is a certain ambiguity and overlapping usage that's oftentimes difficult to express. In other words the two terms were envisioned as *different, but not fully independent*. This interdependence was easier to observe in the distinction they made between institutional dimensions of religion and personal

ones, the latter as almost similar to spirituality. Even if I use S/R interchangeably for the rest of the paper, because of the interconnection and oftentimes non-differentiation with which respondent used the two terms, the spiritual part should be appreciated as more expressive of the views of the participants.

Another important observation was that some respondents were hesitant or reticent in using either of the two terms in addressing their spiritual life, as both of them were perceived as having negative connotations. They preferred to use the conceptual metaphor of “living in faith” and “having a personal relationship with the God of the Bible.” This designation was used by all the respondents as the most important linguistic depiction of their understanding of S/R as a real, personal, dynamic, permanent and manifested relationship with God.

*So faith has a lot to do with personal relationship. It's not something impersonal like religion where you almost feel like you are being driven by the fear of punishment, but it's a personal relationship that inspires a certain behavior or certain actions and I think they are led by the hope of reward, the hope of maintaining that relationship.(Daniela)*

#### *Dichotomous view of spirituality and religion*

Most of the participants had a dichotomous view about the relationship between spirituality and religion. Considering that the wealth of data relevant to this view would have occupied too much space in the body of my study, I present the relevant citations in Appendix D to be found at the end of the paper.

Aiming to facilitate the reader’s understanding of the subsumed emergent themes in a concise and appealing way, I have organized the data in the following table:

<b>Spirituality</b>	<b>Religion</b>
Internal Motivation	External Constraints
Adaptive Changing/dynamic/growing	Non-Adaptive Fixed/Rigid
Expresses highest values	Informs highest values
Constitutive	Construct
Playfield of faith	Framework of development
Internalized beliefs, attitudes and behaviors	Imposes codes/rules, do's and don'ts
Reflexive	Authoritative
Following God	Narrow group loyalties
God's initiative in reconnecting with humans	Human effort in reconnecting with God
Living by the Bible	Tradition (sometimes not) according to the Bible
Self-appropriated	Subscribed for/pushed into/forced
Personal	Impersonal
Social responsibility	Social uniformity and conformity
Reality	Image/appearance
Continuous (time independent)	Discontinuous (time dependent)
Private	Public

*(Table -Dichotomous view of spirituality and religion)*

As evidenced in the descriptors used this table, the interviewed Romanian evangelicals have a polarized conceptual understanding of S/R. The religion pole seems to be the stable one, fixed and more importantly structural. The other pole, of spirituality, is understood as having to do with more of the agency aspect. In this sense the concepts are not just polarized but dialectically positioned. The inner tension created by positioning is occupied by the larger concept of “faith”.

*I see religion and spirituality as two different sets. If I were to draw a Venn diagram to meet they're two complete different sets and depending on individuals they may never intercept or overlap"(Daniela)*

*Religion, I think and I see it as a set of rules, regulations, a ticket, if you will, of do's and don'ts. Religion says if you do this you will be "clean", otherwise you are not religious. Being spiritual I don't think is a formula, its sets free, it's nothing I do that I do will make God love more. That's kind of how I see, it's recognize what God did for, for us, accepting ... (pause) that we are his children. (Andrea)*

Although the category of religion was cast into the negative side of the dichotomy, one participant made reference to a special positive characteristic of it. Daniela sees it as a framework for moral development, especially for children and new converts as an educating tool, but even this role is deemed as a "stepping stone" toward spiritual maturity:

*Religion has merits for establishing the framework for children and newly-converted Christians. As they grow and/or mature in the knowledge of the Scriptures, the external constraint of religion should be less and less needed, since Faith – the internal motivator – takes the driver seat. (Daniela)*

On the other hand spirituality is understood as a sine qua non condition of human life when applied to everybody, but in a more specific sense it represents a way of relating to reality, "a way of life" – more than just a worldview, with visible display ("spiritual things mean absolutely nothing without practical things" - George) in their attitudes and behaviours, and which streams from their inward connection to God. Spirituality was appreciated as the larger domain that transcends human limitations and mortality. It is also biblically and theologically informed: "I think it speaks a lot more about things that are unseen... you know, I believe, along with a bunch of theologians who say this, that we are made of three parts, of body, soul and spirit." (George)

When asked about changes in their spiritual and religious understandings after coming to Canada, some chose to redefine my question: "I wouldn't say change. I would say enrich. (Laura)". Most of them said that this modification was a perceived growing of their



faith/spirituality as result of their immigration experience: “Of course, it changes because we change, we grow older and mature and we experience life different levels and seasons in your life, and of course it changes” (Victor). Because the whole experience was assimilated as part of divine guidance, the successful realization of the immigration process was attributed to God and in this manner had contributed to increase their confidence and reliance on spiritual dimensions of their experience. I will expand on this theme in the next section referring to the role of S/R.

### *View of God*

One of the most important aspects of the respondents’ understanding of S/R was their view of God, as the supreme eternal being and primary object of faith. The participants expressed their Trinitarian belief in a real, personal and relational God (“living God”, “24 hours partnership”- Andreea), that protects, and intervenes in their life by answering prayers and guiding their personal histories. He was presented as omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent; both transcendent (beyond the material universe) and immanent (involved in the world). The most important metaphors used to talk about God were: Father and Creator. He was regarded as the true source of spirituality and the embodiment of good, love, and hope. He punishes and rewards. He energizes their acts and provides meaning to their life. An important note here is that in Christian understanding God “transcends human sexual distinctions” (God is spirit -John 4:24), in this paper I will use various masculine personal pronouns (i.e., he, him, his), not in an attempt to prove that God is masculine, but to follow the way of speaking of the respondents when referring to God. Still, one participant envisioned Jesus as incorporating feminine traits too. “I never doubted that God is a Him (laughing). I read the Bible and he likens himself to a father, never a mother. Jesus likens himself to a mother. But to me God is a He (laughing).” (Daniela).

## **Experience of spirituality/religion**

When talking about the role that S/R has in their life, Evangelical Romanians revealed it as a general and comprehensive dimension that's applicable to their whole life:

*S/R expressed through practices:* A variety of expressions of their S/R was mentioned by the participants. These are practiced on an individual level on daily basis, though some admitted this doesn't happen all the time because of their busy life, in which case it would be on communal weekly basis. The most important of them was reading and studying the Bible, which holds the locus of authority for them. The others were: praying, worshiping - often equated to singing, meditating, tithing -giving money to church, confessing -required when a wrong has been done to a person as well as to God. Some of the practices quoted have only a communal dimension: communion, celebrations, participating in diverse ministries/activities of the church like: music, youth groups, or "life groups/soul groups" (George) – where they study the Bible together and share life experiences. All of these practices have the purpose of increasing their faith in God and forming strong social bonds.

*S/R providing meaning and purpose:* All seven participants referred to this role of S/R, by affirming the centrality of their S/R experience throughout their life and expressing how the whole experience of their relationship with God offers a deeper significance and a higher purpose for the way they choose to live their life:

*Every aspect of my life is related to it and every aspect in my life is secondary in relation to it. (Laura)*

*...for me spirituality is everything and the reason I say that is that I believe in God. (Andreea)*

*...spirituality is something that would lead you to do something that is meaningful; in my opinion... that's where the sense of purpose comes from. (George)*

*S/R forming identity and life style:* Personal identity was understood as originating in their spiritual life, thereby impacting the organization of their daily activities, their priorities and familial relationships:

*My life pretty much revolves around spirituality and religion; it's what drives every aspect of my life, so my family schedule for example is dictated by the church activity schedule so we make our schedule whatever we do around the church schedule. My kids are involved in bible study, I'm involved in various ministries at church, so all our other activities with the family revolve around those (Daniela)*

*“... the way I raise my kids and the way I relate with my wife, it has very deep implications. The way I relate with my friends, my family, my extended family...” (Victor)*

*S/R and important values:* The importance of **social responsibility and altruism** was the most important and frequently referred to value mentioned by all participants. Spirituality was seen as profoundly personal and relational, and a caring attitude toward people in need was a distinctive mark for a real spiritual person.

*My true contribution to society and the world history is only as big as the extent to which I did good to other people. Nothing else matters in the big picture ...Faith, on the other hand, is what tells me that helping others is not just important, it's my purpose, is the reason why God put me on earth is to be his hand in helping other people ...We understand 'serving God' to mean 'serving others' and strive to integrate 'serving others' into our life, not as separate, random acts or actions, but as a lifestyle. We have become foster parents, desiring to teach our children the value of being there for children who have lost their families and homes... We hosted a large number of new Canadians in our home for 2-3 months at a time, to give them a chance to get a job and find an apartment, desiring to teach our kids that our life is not 'all about me', but 'all about helping anyone who needs our help, if we can help'. (Daniela)*

*...my mission in Canada and in the job that I have is to help people, to treat them with respect, with care. (Amanda)*

*So, if I ask for anything fervently, it is for You (God) to help me to spread it... So that everyone You'll bring my way, will understand that I love them! (Daniela)*

Another important value was **freedom**. Leaving Romania during the dictatorial regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu political freedom as well as religious freedom were very important to the respondents. “So, my father defected from Romania in '89, a few months before the revolution.

Was it '88?, no, sorry, '88, and then we had our papers to come to Canada just a few weeks before the revolution, and then my mom decided to stay for the holidays. So, we actually experience the revolution in Romania and we were on the first plane that flew from Bucharest” (Daniela). As during the Communist period in Romania the borders were closed, especially to “the West” and only in special conditions could somebody obtain a legal permit to leave the country, her father had to flee illegally. This was often time a life risking event and many were imprisoned for many years in jails or labor camps if captured in the attempt, where they suffered abuse, torture and/or death. With all this risks involved, because of the political, economic, and religious deprivation of liberties, thousands of people “defected”. The growing popular dissatisfaction led in the end to the fall of his authoritarian government in December 1989.

The third important value mentioned was *assiduousness*. Their work ethic required a life of hard working that will produce results:” ...we worked. How to tell you? 14 hours per day. We didn’t go anywhere, only we got up on Sunday and we went to church and we came back home and got to sleep to have again energy for six days of work, ok?” (Amanda).

Paul, being a business man often time made reference to ups and downs his business had:

*If I won't be able to work this job where I earn \$10000 and I would have to work another for only \$5000 there comes the worry and you didn't go to work with the same desire as you went at the beginning when you were young and had ambitions. And these made me many times to refocus. (Paul).*

Their assiduousness was understood also as a resource for helping/giving to others:

“Giving to, you know... for the needs of others, for example. More specifically that, if you were to think, you know, whenever you’re giving to someone in need, there’s a sense of meaning right away.” (George)

## Immigration and S/R experience

### *Immigration as Spiritual Journey*

Immigration experience was seen from the evangelical Romanians' perspective as participating in a spiritual journey (more on this motif on the poetry section) that unfolded according to a divine plan. As previously mentioned, the metaphor of the "plan of God" acted as an interpretative framework for their experience:

*So the whole immigration process is just another path in my faith. So I consider it like a pilgrimage and before I came here, I used to compare it with the Abraham's experience. When god said, ok, leave everything and come where I tell you, I just applied this experience to myself. It's like leave your own life in Romania, and leave it behind and come here because you were called to be here. This is the ultimate purpose that I see right now in all immigration process and everything (Laura).*

The reasons provided for their decision to immigrate were economic: "a better life" (Amanda, Paul, Andreea); political: desire for freedom, corruption in the country of origin/better legal system (Paul), persecution under the communist regime (Daniela); educational: better opportunities to study and an increased value of the degree obtained in Canadian schools (George); religious: persecution, discrimination, stigma and name calling because of their religious beliefs:

*...I suffered quite a bit of humiliation in Romania in school because of my religion. I had teachers who... They took the communist propaganda quite seriously, they were taking upon themselves to humiliate students in public, in front of the class any given chance they had...I was made to stand up in class while the teacher was throwing insults at religious sects and all kinds behavior that they were reading in novels about ...that they were attributed to my religion and... even though my church was a recognized religion in Romania, they still called us sects, I think it was part of the propaganda. Just to stigmatize the religion. (Daniela)*

*Now...at school I was called the repentor [the feminine form of the world]"that was in that culture from then and in communism it had a pejorative meaning, right? ... so, it was very difficult for me to live in that environment, knowing that I'm marginalized, put in the corner all the time, being a "repentor". (Amanda)*

### ***S/R experience as a coping mechanism/enabler in immigration process***

Another area of agreement among all participants was the hardship of immigration experience. Their spirituality acted as a resource by providing meaning and support in that traumatic experience. Some held that it contributed to their mental health:

*When I came to Canada...ok, so again, you know, perhaps as a child I don't think I understood a lot of the things that I now I understand but what I can say is that even at that time just knowing and recognizing, again believing that God has a plan with, with my life, with my family and his purpose in my life I think it made that move a bit easier, so the whole transition, just because we, or I believe that He guides and influences our decisions and I knew He was in control therefor He will provide. I believed that He is a good God and, so... yes, I think I can say that at that time I knew deep in my heart that He will provide every step of the way. (Andreea)*

*I think that my faith, spirituality was really an enabler in the whole experience" (Daniela); "Yes, oh, yes, definitely, ya. I would say, would say even, kept me sane in these seasons of my life. Kept me sane. (Victor)*

### ***Challenges faced by evangelical Romanians in immigration experience***

Recounting their process of transitioning and adapting to Canadian context the participants mentioned the following challenges:

*Language barrier:* As newcomers they had difficulties in communicating or understanding English and often times they had to rely on the help of their community in being able to manage their daily life: “my language triggered quite a few jokes...”(Daniela); “Hard in terms of leaving friends behind, leaving family behind, grandparents, learning the language, I didn't knew English at all so I found that intimidating at that time...”. (Andreea). This issue was also problematic in their attempt to form new relationships and connections in Canada, and until language proficiency was improved was seen as contributing to the hardships of newcomers.

*It is the thing when you don't have a clear direction, when you want to give up, because these kind of moments are present everywhere in the countries were the people emigrate. Until they get settled, until they learn the language, until they have some connections, it is not easy (Paul)*

*Cultural barrier:* Immersion in a new culture created for the immigrants an important obstacle, especially for the younger ones who had to integrate in schools. Also adapting to Canadian legislation, educational system or economic life was also perceived as difficult to manage. Struggling for credential recognition was also remarked as a nemesis, especially by the ones with higher education and training level.

*So, the context was quite different from the context i grew up in until that time. School was definitely a big difference. Back in Romania, you know, you started first grade and you had to and you had the same classmates with you all through eight grade even in high school, you never had different class mates in every different class you went to. And here it was all different, it was always a new bunch of people you had to go with and just making any sort of friends when I was pretty much the weird maiden one in school was pretty tough (Daniela)*

*When you came to Canada, when you see people, paying mortgage you don't know what it means, only when you start paying mortgage, you know what it means. You feel!" (Victor); "To come with a school, you have to reorganize all your life and until they recognize your degree and change your job... it is not easy! (Paul)*

*Socio-psychological issues:* Immigration was perceived as a stressful event, a situation in which they felt psychologically alienated and socially disconnected by their usual support network: ``... the fact that... you are alone here, has an impact on your inner life`` (Amanda), or as George and Daniela expressed the same issues in their poems:

*The loss of close friends took its toll  
Depression was about to make amends  
Soon the search for friends was on its  
way  
Though language was a wall of hay  
I could understand, but I was hopeless to  
respond (George)*

*I'm going to go there... who know what  
kind of people I'll meet?  
Whom will I tell about my joy... with whom  
will I share it?  
Who will really care about me... of who I  
am... and what I love?  
And who I am now, will I also be there?  
How will I find myself? (Daniela)*

***Representation of Canada in collective imaginary of Romanians evangelicals***

It is important to note here how in spite of all the challenges recognized by the respondents, almost all of them retained a positive, almost idealistic representation of Canada as a “land of all opportunities” and blessings, as grasped by a faithful and hardworking person:

*However, for me... I already set up my mind that we're not going anywhere, we're going to live here [in Romania] for the rest of our lives, that's it! ... So whenever I found myself at the beginning of year 2000 in Canada, it was like: Wow, what a world! And now, you have to realize something... [he stopped here -meaning having a life of accomplishments] (George)*

*Canada it's a great country, it's a country in which you have rights and the sky's the limit (Amanda)*

*I left a place I once called home*

*All that I knew; all that made sense  
[...]  
A world so tiny from a distance  
Yet full of opportunities (Andrea)*

But also the counter discourse it is present in their accounts. In this version, the expected opportunities were not immediately visible, were out of reach for the time being. But even there the underlying message was that (1) opportunities existed and were expected and (2) the future will make them available!

*So I arrived in a foreign land.  
A land of opportunity I've heard  
But Ms. "Opportunity", didn't wait for me  
At the airport with flowers. (Victor)*

Canada was appreciatively regarded as a provider of a better legal system, education and life opportunities than their country of origin. But most importantly was the issue of freedom of expressing their faith without constraints:



*I see Canada like a country where you are free to express your faith. Now..., what do I mean by that: in Romania I was bullied for my faith, in Canada I am not bullied for my faith. I'm free to go church. I'm free to express it. I'm free to comment and share it with people that are willing to listen to [the] Word, but doesn't mean that they will agree with what I say. So, in Canada, you are basically free to pursue your faith, to express your faith.....as you know. I mean, there are so many religions in Canada, there are so many nations represented in Toronto, and everyone has its own church, you know: the synagogue, the mosque, whatever... and they go and nobody is obstructed. At an official level, nobody from the government opposes you. Nobody at work bullies you for your faith, so, from this point of view I think it's...it's freedom, like there is a lot of freedom for all of us, to express our faith. (Amanda)*

### **The role of S/R community in the immigration experience**

The church (understood as a free association of believing individuals under the guidance and government of God) had an important role in managing the above-mentioned stressful circumstances. Their community, according to their accounts, played an essential role in their immigration experience:

*The church is the tool, ... through which God works with people that pass through trials, that have problems. The church was the place of refuge- where the people with problems run and found solutions and aid. This is an extraordinary thing. (Victor).*

As only one respondent answered that their community was not involved in the process of their transition and then adapting to Canadian context, though she made the important distinction between material and spiritual help and admitted that the latter was part of her important needs met by her S/R community, all the rest revealed both mediating, as well as hindering aspects of their community in spiritual, practical, psychological, social and cultural domain.

*It's all because of God and his holy people*

*The Church community and relationships*

*That I am where I am today*

*Singing "Oh Canada" on 1<sup>st</sup> of July (George)*

*Mediating effects of their S/R community in adapting to Canadian context*

As already mentioned immigration and settlement in Canada was experienced as a stressful, traumatic event by many of the respondents. They found in their respective S/R community the most important resource for help and support for the challenges identified above. Especially at the time of arrival in Canada, at the most vulnerable point of their experience, they received assistance to start up their life here, but the mediating effect was not confined just for that initial moment but was reported to continue during their involvement in those communities. Often, this assistance went beyond denominational or ethnic boundaries, though it was largely oriented toward people within the studied group. Some of the most important areas were:

*Spiritual:* For the respondents, participating in their S/R communities was first and foremost a way to nourish and manifest their relationship to God. It was the place where they could engage communally in spiritual practices and grow in their faith.

*Yet, I never felt that demonstration or overwhelming experience of His love until I came to Canada. So when I came here and complete strangers, people who never heard of us, never seen us, never knew us, sacrificed a lot of their time and a lot of their resources to ensure a well-being it really brought home to me the concept that God is a real father who takes care of our needs. The fact that He has... ( pause), He prepared every little detail to make sure that our coming here was going smoothly and we were received well and that we had everything we needed and there were people surrounding us with love, to me that was to ultimate proof that God is real and that he loves us , He does, ...and He watches over us, He gets involved in every detail of our life.(Daniela)*

Laura, a member of Catholic church who wanted to participate in my study because of her affinities with the Baptist community when asked about the role that the S/R community played in her experience she pointed out that in spite of recognized differences she felt welcomed and spiritually aided in this new community:

*I need to get into detail here. When we arrived, there were two doors open for us, and in terms of community, and one of them was a Catholic church, which we sought, and..., well we didn't receive much in terms of community, so we were able to access sacraments and the liturgy but that was about it. So the other door that was open for us, and for which we were really grateful, was the Baptist church because some*

*friend took us there and we were very impressed by the way we were received there. Well, it just felt like a real community and for us right now, this is what we consider our spiritual community, if you want, even if there are certain differences, and we are aware of that, we wouldn't like to umm let them get in the way our brotherhood and our community, so we received a lot of spiritual help from that community. (Laura)*

*Psychological:* In talking about the psychological benefits of participating in their S/R community, people made reference on one level to general categories like: a sense of belonging, stability, encouragement.

*So having that network of support at church where I knew there were people who loved me and care about me and also a whole lot of teens my age who were my friends and I really didn't look at all the differences that the kids at school kind of looked at to discriminate it just kind felt like , you know, I could survive. I didn't need to belong at school as long as I belonged at church. It give the sense that I belongingness ,that I was part of something bigger and that I wasn't just a lonely, insignificant person. I think that being a teenager that was very important to me, finding that significance as a person, as a unique individual. (Daniela)*

*... the biggest thing for me as a kid when I came here and when we transitioned to a new culture and a new country was that we were never alone. Being able to leave a place, a community and came to a different one made it somehow easier. Yes, we didn't know the people, but we felt like we were coming to a big family that were open to receive us in the church or in the congregation, so, you know, we felt them being there for us and so we never consider them anything less than friends. (Andrea)*

*... I always found encouragement. There were moments when I was shocked of some things that were happening and someone would tell me "I went through these as well". The fact that someone else had the same experience, and that I wasn't the only one that paid that price, made me think., I would look at him, to his present situation, and I would think that I will be able to recover (Paul)*

On the other level, they spoke about counseling practices that help them like: marriage counseling and conflict resolution, which were important in dealing with diverse marital issues or struggles. These kinds of situations sometime arose due to the initial pressures over the members of the family to contribute financially and lack of time to address their problems. One participant declared that she and her husband worked 14 hours per day, and those were difficult times for them, but an important effect was that their relationship was even closer after that

period of intense struggle.

*...the church was the place where, when you have problems with your wife, because, generally, many people have problems with the wives because of the stress, because both of them work, each one comes home with their work problems, they meet, they don't have enough of that or the other. The church was the one making a mediation of two. It was extraordinary. It is the most important thing the Romanians have in Canada. No matter whether is the Orthodox church, Baptist or Pentecostal. (Paul)[the gender issue alluded here will be discussed in a later section]*

*Social:* Social networking was one of the strongest characteristic of their S/R community. The image frequently used was that of a “family”, an extended family that cares for you and steps in, in your most difficult times, and helps you in very practical ways. This network of close and involved relationships are the main source of the “belongingness effect” mentioned above. Many participants said that within their community they found at least one family that received them in their home, providing shelter and resources until they could manage by themselves. Sometimes after spending some time in one family they could move to another one if they’re still in a vulnerable position. They also received offers to visit, to have a hot meal or to participate in larger gatherings of other families. This was associated with positive mental health effects and positive attitudes that helped them to face the hardships of immigration process.

*...we were blown away by how they helped us; well, first of all, they when we came to Canada, my dad actually came earlier and he kind of set up things for us and he was telling us how some members of the church helped us find a place to live, we were renting out at the time and anyway... and then, once we got here, they would call us – I remember like this was never happened in Romania - they would call us every Sunday, for the first two, three months, if not more, every Sunday we would eat at someone’s house, from the church; they would just invite us over just to get to know us... (George)*

*Economic:* An important finding was that almost all participants said that their first job in Canada was acquired through members of their S/R community: “the church was the place where to find a job. The church was the place where you could borrow... [money]” (Paul). Sometimes

this first job was offered by a member of their community, other times they acted just as mediators. This was complemented with help in orienting the newcomers with practical things as shopping in reasonably priced stores, finding affordable renting, helping the with painting or construction projects or even providing temporary relief for single mothers with children:

*... for example, ... recently me and my wife, we have a friend in our church who we know, she doesn't have her husband is gone, ok? She's a single mom with three kids, we've heard and we know for sure that she's had a hard time trying to come home and make food for the kids...? I went home with my wife, we made too much food one time, so we took half or more of the food that we made, we took a little bit of everything that we had, drove over to this woman and left the food for them there.(George)*

*Cultural:* Another area of assistance was mediating and facilitating language understanding for newcomers, but also by providing a cultural environment in which they could use and express in the language of their country of origin. Especially when they wanted to express their spirituality, they found it easier to do so in Romanian: “we wanted to hear sermon in Romanian language, because we wanted to sing, to worship God in Romanian language, because, even until today, for some reason it's much easier to worship God in Romanian than in English... when I speak about the personal experiences or I'm praying it's much easier for me in Romanian language” (Amanda). Beyond this buffering outcome of their community in utilizing their language, it also provided a social medium of preserving cultural and religious traditions of their common ethnicity. This last characteristic had not only positive effects, but also negative ones as I will show hereafter.

### ***Hindering effects of their S/R community in adapting to Canadian context***

*Acculturative issues:* An interesting finding highlights a dialectic tension within the Romanian evangelical community in Canada: a tension between the first generation and second generation between an isolationist position and an integrative one. While the younger generation

adopts a more opened attitude towards the larger Canadian culture and towards new and contemporary changes within their community, especially in relations with their forms of worship, the older generation and their spiritual and religious culture is presented as outdated in a sort of “out-of-sync effect”, not only in relation with similar evangelical communities in Canada but even to the original evangelical community existing in Romania : "My first impression about Canada, at least about this area, was that these people seem [his church community] to remain forgotten in time. The evangelical communities from the country [Romania] made big steps towards modernization. Here, it seems the people are stoned, not only about their clothes, but about their mentalities. This was a first negative impact” (Paul). The same effect was reiterated by another respondent: “In a sense, the issue that I had with the Romanian ethnic churches in Canada is that fact that basically in the churches, in the Romanian communities, they live, they act like they’re still in Romania.”

The above mentioned effect led some of the respondents to feel that this created a medium where they felt overprotected to the extent that at least it hindered initial integration in Canada.

*A..perhaps the only point that I can think of at this point right now is being cocooned, I guess, in a community of people that , that shared the same background as us. Aaa...perhaps it slowed down the process of integrating further into the society, or, not I should call it society, but into become more “Canadianised” and otherwise I think and , you know, perhaps it could be a good thing or a bad thing. (Andrea).*

The ideal acculturative process for the people I interviewed was integration without losing specific ethnicity.

*Oppressive religious norms and attitudes:* When talking about norms or rules that were perceived as oppressive, the respondents always connected this subject with the religion. This

falls within the dichotomist framework previously raised. Daniela, was a teenager when she arrived in Canada, and reflecting to her own immigration experience she said:

*I was 15, so ( giggling) being an adolescent any rule was a constraint to me, so I pretty much saw religion as a constraint, when it came to dress codes that were strictly enforced by my parents, my father specially, and I saw religion at that time, my mind set was religion is a mean of proclaiming to the world that I'm different and I was suppose to be happy that I was different, but I couldn't, I could not feel any joy that I was different.... Yes, there's one big thing that I wish wasn't there and that's the dress code. I guess being a girl and being a teenager that was a really strange time for me. (Daniela)*

The “dress code” that she is referring, though an entire subject of debate in itself, could be summarized as: No earrings, no pants, simple, long dresses, covered head. Some sources for this view come from Bible text like: “ But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered. (1 Corinthians 11:5-6, KJV); “Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.” (1 Peter 3:3-4, KJV). I used an older version of Bible translation for exemplification, King James Version, because the more recent and accurate ones would not emphasise enough why this dressing code was interpreted as applying to her as a teenager (note: the more recent ones, ESV- English Standard Version for example, make clear “the Greek word *gunē* is translated wife in verses that deal with wearing a veil, a sign of being married in first-century culture). This kind of “dress code” has a variety of interpretations in the larger Romanian evangelical community, ranging from unimportant for spiritual matters, specific rules being interpreted as historical and cultural in nature, to very

important, as signaling spiritual issues and interpreted as timeless rules with universal application.

Coming from a very traditional family, she explains how her father demanded her to wear this kind of clothing which made her feel like a “weird maiden” and constituted a “visual differentiator that set her apart from the rest of the world”. Especially at school she said: “everybody had no choice, but to look at me like I was the odd kid in school”. An interesting observation here could be the contradiction of the situation in her story, because the original purpose in the cited text is to not draw attention to oneself but to let one’s inner presence speak. This dress code did just the opposite in drawing attention to herself.

For a developing female teenager that was felt as a repressive experience, one that resulted at the time in low confidence in herself, impending on her social relationships and confining her to relationships with only in-group members. In her account she speaks about how her mother intervened to help her: “Slowly my mom, because she was a seamstress, she started making us clothes that resembled more the Canadian style and because my mom made them my father didn’t look so critically upon them. But they were still dresses! (laughing)” (Daniela).

No doubt this practice hold an important weight in her experience, because she kept going back to it. She also said that growing up, maturing in her spiritual understanding and searching for better understanding of Bible she came to see how “dressing code” was just part of religion. Reinterpreting her experience in the view of her ulterior understandings, she concludes:

*I might dress ‘apropriately’ when I go to church, because Religion prescribes a certain dress code, but Faith is the one dictating how I dress when I go to work, or school, or to the beach... In social circles where Religion is not a factor, Faith is definitely the differentiator....for those who have it! (Daniela)*



Another respondent that expressed his discontent with religious norms was George. He recounts his experience with a previous church, before the one that he presented as welcoming, egalitarian, people-oriented and nourishing. Describing the first one as an image of an oppressive, narrow-minded, rule-oriented, highly-hierarchical religious community in which he felt unable to develop spiritually and personally: “The expectation would be that you follow the rules of the community, that you do what’s expected of you, such things as speaking what the church tells you; I had my own talents in music, so you know, we were supposed to lead some sort of music ministry in the church, but do it according to the rules, very rigid rules”. He also tells how gradually he decided to leave that community and how in that process he dealt with psychological issues as anger and fear of being “left out”:

*GEORGE: I was afraid that if I would say anything I would definitely be left out and completely...*

*MARIUS: What does it mean in this context to be left out? [...] Left out could mean to not be included in this serving that you’re mentioning, or people, members of that community shun you away or you know, not talking to you or just ignoring you...*

*GEORGE: Yes.*

*MARIUS: ...discriminating you?*

*GEORGE: No, I’m talking about the discrimination part... I knew that they would completely just not talk to me, almost like, you know, take me out, completely out of the circle, alright? It’s like an outsider almost, okay?*

George’s story raises important questions about the power of spiritual/religious communities not only improve and enhance people’s lives but also harm and damage them. The “belonging effect” as was portrayed in their stories had an immense positive impact in their life. But when that relationship is severed, for various reasons, what are the negative effects of being left as George put it “out of the circle”? Important issues arise here, to name just a few: group power vs. individual power; attachment issues; psychological effects, etc. Maybe it’s better to let

George to illuminate this area once again:”...the pain, and all the things that were said about me as a result of me leaving the church, were absolutely horrible. I couldn’t believe it...” (George)

The last religious norm and its resulting attitude that can contribute to the social isolationism and act as an obstacle to adapting to Canadian context is a kind of ‘Us vs. Them’ mentality. As Amanda brings forward this subject:

*Ya! I was told from an early age you are a child of God, you grew into the church, your friends should be Christians. And we went so far that we limited our relationships. We weren't even looking to have friends from outside and even I get along well with one or another, not. I wouldn't pursue the friendship or follow through, because I knew that...Hey, you know, we don't! I mean, we with ours, they with theirs and so on, we don't mix. (Amanda)*

Amanda then continues her story in revealing how this religious norm was surpassed by a better understanding of the role of social relationships as discussed in the Bible and how then her selections of friends become more inclusive:

*I mean my friends circle, by all means, all people are welcomed, you know? So, this was one of the things with which I needed to confront, to look into the Bible to see if it's truly like this and if it is not like this then... I should remove it from my life. (Amanda)*

Nevertheless, her words points out to a sensitive area of religious customs that can have

unwanted social effects, area where critical thinking and even a thoughtful approach to their spiritual source, tradition and history can bring a better understanding of this issue.

*Gender issues:* This theme was not directly inquired about in my interviews, but emerges from the data. For example, when Paul talked about the marital counseling provided in his church, paying attention to his phrasing brings into attention his perspective: “the church was the place where, *when you have problems with your wife*, because, generally, *many people have problems with the wives because of the stress*, because both of them work, each one comes home with their work problems, they meet, they don't have enough of that or the other. The church was the one making a mediation of two” (Paul). The locus of the problem is firmly identified as

originating with the women. Probably, because from Paul's standpoint, the work of the home is seen as her responsibility. My suggestion is that if the wives referred here were to be asked about their perspective, they could point out that the source of their problem could be, as well, on the other side of the relationship or at least, more nuanced, in the quality of their mutual relationship. But it is also important to observe here how economic conditions, as overwork due to employment and lack of resources for the work of the home have negative effects on the marriages and families of specific to immigrants households. Second, we can pay attention to the above citation of Daniela's words about her mother alleviating her dilemma by creating more culturally appropriate dressing for her daughter, clothes that were more acceptable to her father because they were made by her mom. One can only wonder why this intervention unfolded rather "slowly". This speaks of an area on which evangelical Romanians could and should address and explore more carefully, within their cultural and spiritual/religious framework. That is the issues of gender equality and equity.

### **Romanian evangelicals and Social Workers**

When asked about how would they like a helping professional, specifically a social worker, to relate to them and to understand about their spirituality, the respondents answers were all very similar and their responses could be organized in the following themes:

*Respect and dignity:* By this they meant, not only respect for them as human beings; but respect for their ethnicity, cultural heritage and more importantly, for their religious and spiritual beliefs. As already seen their sense of identity is wrapped in their beliefs and "I am who I am" (in the next citation) means also – I am a spiritual person, I understand myself as having this part as a human being and I express it in my spiritual practices and as part of a particular community

and I think this deserves to be respected. This concern was expressed unanimously by all the participants and it was introduced as a sine qua non condition to a good relationship with social workers.

*I look it this way: I'm a person, you are a person. Now what you believe, what you stand for and these other things, these are details, but the main thing is we're two people and I respect you to the fullest... for this reason and I will treat you like that. So I expect from them the same thing, not necessarily to...to come and: Do, Don't do this! or Do not say this! Just be yourself, ok? Be who you are. I am who I am, I respect you, respect me. I don't expect a special treatment, because I have I don't know what faith. I don't expect that, because I think that will be discriminating, but in the opposite way, if you understand the idea...so I just, you know...respect, that's all we want. Treat me like a human being and I'll do the same and that's the bottom line." (Amanda)*

*...in the event that we come in contact with a social worker like yourself [...] just be respected as I respect back and not be in a situation where I feel embarrassed , embarrassed for my beliefs (Andrea)*

*No predetermined negative assumptions:* From previous experiences the baseline expectation when interacting with helping professionals was that they will exhibit predispositions to negatively categorize them as “outdated”, “narrow-minded”, “zeros”, “brain-washed”, etc, because of their spiritual beliefs and religious affiliation : “...all I need ...wish they would do is to respect it, to not come with preconceived idea (Amanda)”; “Not to say, *leave these, these are zero*. With this kind of man I think I won't be able to cooperate." (Paul). These kinds of stereotypes hinder the helping relationship and it creates an initial distance that is hard to overcome and this can only be detrimental for both for the social worker and the clients: “I would hope that any professional helper would take the time to listen to my motivations, to not stereotype me based on my religion or my ethnic background, to not make assumptions that being religious is equal to being brain-washed . [...] respect the experiences that people had in the past that led them to think that God is a reality and not just make the assumption that they were brained washed and that's why they would think like that." (Daniela)

Besides these hidden or presupposed negative assumptions, one respondent spoke about her experience as a foster parent with social workers and their blatant negative assumptions. In Danila's story, the child that she had in her care had a mother who used drugs. After a few years of taking care of this child, probably in a new assessment of family eligibility to continue to provide care for her, the social workers were looking at the situation from „at risk“ perspective that appeared to Daniela as a presumed outcome (drug usage) for that child: „...for them to make the assumption that just because the majority of kids go that way, she's gonna go that way. It's almost like giving away. It's like saying you have no choice, but to go through this because that's what's ahead of you!” (Danila). Then she narrates how the social workers, despite the fact that the girl never used drugs before, started to question if in light of what might happen, she should not be moved in a safer location. But the thing that she felt was the most offensive was the stated assumptions: „that just because we had, the religion that they knew we had, we were not willing to help that child and our religion was going to be more important than the life of that child. So they were coming to us with questions like, are you willing to put up with this? It was not a matter of trying to put up with something that might not even happen.” (Daniela) As a conclusion to her experience Daniela said:” They almost came to the door with the expected answers without really putting in the effort to understand the deeper layers.” (Daniela)

*Openness to discuss spiritual aspects:* As spirituality is at the core of their identity and their interpretative framework for experienced reality they would advise the helping professional to allow an open discussion without embarrassment or awkwardness in relation to spiritual matters as this dimension is correlated with their social problems:

*First of all, I wouldn't want the religion to be a taboo topic. I'd like to be able to express my belief and my spirituality and not be judged because of that and in return, of course, I'm aware that I am doing the same thing. I would respect any religion and any belief as long as it does not harm anybody, because I believe in freewill. But I'd like to be*

*able to talk about it without feeling like I'm hitting on some prohibited ground. And also, I'd like social workers to be sensitive to any beliefs in terms that there are certain things that I would accept or not, and umm... I'd like to be understood any of that.[...] Well, probably the best way would be to ask questions, direct questions, like a, okay ..., how do you express your spirituality. I wouldn't mind such a question, but usually they are not allowed to ask because this is just ... I don't know, it's very sensitive (Laura)*

*Intentional effort to explore and understand their S/R:* Addressing this theme, the respondents talked about two levels of exploration. First, dealing with their client's personal spirituality, in other words, understanding how they are as a person situated in their spirituality: "...to try to understand my level of spirituality, because that's different from age to age, from perspective to perspective, from a background to background. So my spirituality is not the same as anybody else's in church." (Daniela). Second, an effort from the part of social workers to read, research and educate themselves about the specifics of spiritual or religious understandings of their clients, prior to or during the helping relationship: "Also, maybe to have like a basic knowledge about my faith. And if I were in his place, I would also have basic knowledge about other religions and I know there are a lot of things which are important to different religions. If a worker trusts without even knowing, they wouldn't have the basic knowledge they should know, then there would be awkward situations, which could be avoided." (Laura)

*Involving their S/R community or leaders in the helping relationship:* As demonstrated, their spiritual community and corresponding leaders holds a major role in their life. This can be used as a source of information about the client or even involving them in the helping relationship: "One suggestion would be try to understand cultural or spiritual background of that person because there are very interconnected and there are overlapping at the times. And umm.. trying to understand that and do research and talk with the pastor or their spiritual leader if I might say or whoever, and trying to integrate that into what you are doing on file or whatever profile of person .... Because that's very important" (Victor)

Poem - Andreea

I left a place I once called home  
All that I knew; all that made sense  
I felt a pain hard to explain  
Leaving behind all I remembered

I knew it's beautiful to travel  
To soar above the clouds and see  
A world so tiny from a distance  
Yet full of opportunities

But how was I to keep on smiling  
When all I knew of happiness  
Were friends and family and places  
Now left behind for something else

Somehow I knew there is a purpose  
A greater plan than I could see  
I trusted, prayed and meditated  
Knowing that God will answer me

And ever since I keep on trusting  
In what I hoped; in what was  
promised  
He never failed; He more than  
doubled  
All of my joys, all of my triumphs

I traveled back few times since then  
To visit where I once was living  
I proudly say I have two homes  
There for a while and here much  
longer

My homes are always temporary  
Whether I'm there or somewhere  
else  
I'm made to travel with a purpose  
Into eternity with Christ  
THAT IS MY FINAL  
DESTINATION!

*"Trust in the Lord with all your  
heart  
And lean not unto your  
understanding  
In all your ways acknowledge Him  
And He will direct your path"  
(Psalm 3:5-6)*

*Advocating for a more holistic approach to human experience and social problems:* Underlining their whole section of recommendations to helping professionals was this theme of a non-reductive, holistic approach. Respondents understood and had a vigorous understanding that when social workers have to intervene in their families, if they have to "get into a home, into somebody's house, it's usually something happened... 'cause if things are going okay, they're not there... there's obviously an issue" (George). So, considering the delicate nature of the social situation, the social workers should display sensitivity and apply a holistic approach. The respondents envisioned the role of social workers as more than providing material or social help, but as professionals that provide hope and meaning:

*They need someone to give them hope. [...] I am thinking that a social worker should make some efforts to understand a person and his spirituality, because the needs of a person are not only of taking care of him, if he is ill, if he is hungry, if cannot work, but to understand some needs and ideas he has. There are people who will give up living only because they don't have in their minds the perception that they will have a future. They already give up fighting. The social worker besides bringing his plate or washing him, or besides taking care of his medicines, he should encourage him spiritually, he should also be interested in his spiritual well-being. Seeing all these, the person will be ready to cooperate and accept the help. (Paul)*

### **Findings from Poetry**

The thematic analysis of the poetry section of my study contributed to the themes that were presented already as more often than not overlapping each other. This being said, the major theme

emerging from the poems received from the respondents was that of: The Journey.

Many of the poems received were written in the format of a prayer or a biblical text, resembling with the Psalms section of the Bible. They also used in their lyric attempts comparisons with typological biblical persons (Abraham- Laura; Goliath – Daniela). But the central character, the Hero of their poem was God.

In an attempt to use their specific poetic language, the immigration experience in relation with their spirituality was described in the following sequence:

- a) Leaving home – with all the socio-psychological effects already discussed.
- b) Stepping into Unknown
- c) Trusting in God`s ontological presence and comforting support
- d) Integrating in a spiritual community of faith, love and hope

*My Lord, You are my home*

In the middle of my journey  
I heard your mysterious calling  
And just as so many ages ago  
Our father Abraham left his way  
To follow his faith in Your will  
I put my whole life in your hands  
And left behind the only country I  
knew.

I jumped into the unknown  
And found out just how deep  
Your love for me is.

You guided all my steps;  
You watched over my family;  
You gave us everything we  
needed.

And listened to my prayers;  
And understood my pains;  
And comforted my fears.

You made my path smooth  
And carried me in Your arms  
Cause You knew I was following  
You all the way  
And that You are the true  
destination of my journey.

(Laura)



- e) Worship and awe resulting from God's blessings
- f) Ongoing reflecting of God in acts of love toward others
- g) Final destination is reunion with God

These themes are often met in various spiritual traditions, and their core significance was already presented together with the analyses of the interviews.

The next chapter will introduce a short discussion from a theoretical and practical perspective of the findings.

## Chapter 7: Discussion

### Theoretical discussion

When writing from a critical realist's perspective, the respondents' accounts have to be analyzed not only as discourses to be interpreted, but as evidences of broader phenomena and processes that need to be explained. This is not a theological paper, nor a sociology of religion one, therefore my purpose is not to prove (or disprove) the existence of God or how religion functions in a society. Its purpose is not even to necessarily correlate critical realism to Christianity in particular. For that particular topic, I could recommend for the interested reader the recent book of Andrew Wright, "Christianity and Critical Realism" (2013). This being said, the "luxuriant ontology" (Collier, 2005: 334) - stratified, complex and layered, and at the same time relational, open and emergent, characteristic to the critical realism theoretical framework, allows the *possibility* that the accounts of the participants in the study can be interpreted as a real existential and experiential encounter with transcendence, without an a priori dismissal of their lived experience as being merely imaginative.

The question regarding the meaning and nature of this "transcendence" has a history that its' coextensive to human history. It is this author's opinion that it will not be settled any time soon, especially not through deductive arguments. Against some peoples' predictions that spirituality and religion will soon become obsolete, social reality confronts us with the fact of world-wide resurgence of this phenomena. Radical secularists, militant deconstructivists and avowed atheists continue to represent only a very small proportion of the population; while according to the studies between 1980 and 2004 in some Western countries, an increase, rather than a decrease, was registered in S/R interest (Halman at al., 2008). Considering that the largest

portion of world population claims to have had this kind of spiritual/religious experience it can't be simply waived away. I can only wander alongside the authors of "Transcendence":

"Is there not some reality behind it all? Can all be similarly mistaken about the category of the transcendent and are all just mistaking group consciousness for the divine? There are no simple answers, but this observation, too, carries its own power." (Archer, Collier, Porpora, 2004).

In critical realist terms, the identification of generative causal mechanisms responsible for observed patterns in our experience is known as 'retroduction' (Elder-Vass, 2010). In other words, retroduction is a basic realist mode of inference, distinct from induction and deduction that moves from the manifested phenomena to an idea; an explanation of the generative mechanism, which if it were real, would account for the phenomena in question. "Transfactual or transcendental argument is a form of retroduction implying that one seeks these qualities beyond what is immediately given" (Danermark et al., 2002). Using retroduction, one possible valid explanation of respondents' experiences of the transcendence can be that in the *real/causal strata* such a being that we call God exists, possessing distinct and irreducible causal powers, and that his self-revelatory activity at the *actual strata* is perceived and reported at the *empirical strata* by human beings as "encounters with the Transcendent". In a distinctive Christian interpretation, God's self-revelatory activity is not limited only to the subjectively perceived experience of transcendence, but more importantly, in the life and person of Jesus Christ, and in the recording of peoples' experiences of him and previous historical activity of God in the Bible. Of course, this understanding may be, and often is contradicted by opposing views. By doing so, keeping in mind our epistemological fallibility, these kind of questions, as any others pertaining to human experience, are continuously debated using judgmental rationality, striving to arrive at some better explanations regarding the real world that we inhabit.

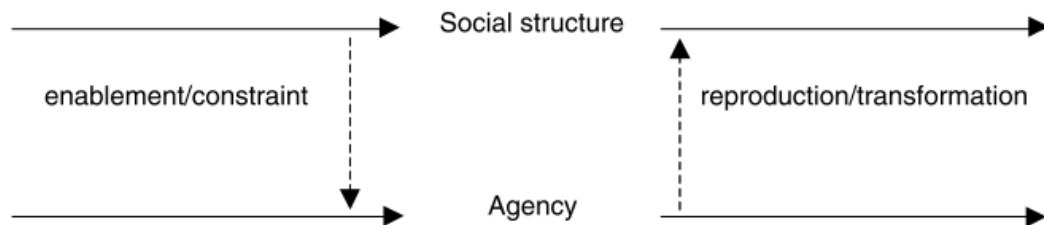
The main point that I want to emphasize using this line of argument is that, for us, as social workers, given the epistemological precariousness regarding the question of God's existence, and at least the ontological possibility that the experiences of our clients are generated by a real encounter with transcendence, even if that experience eludes us at a personal level, the best attitude is that of respect.

The second important area of critical realist theoretical framework that's important for this discussion is the way CR comprehends society. From this perspective, society consists of two separate phenomena: acting people and social structure. These two are interrelated but at the same time, distinct from one another. In other words, structure and agency belong to separate strata, meaning that they have completely different properties and powers, but each one is indispensable for how the other will be shaped. The important thing to notice is the fact that social structures are always the context in which action and social exchange happens, and concomitantly, social interaction constitutes the environment in which the structures are produced, reproduced and transformed (Archer 1995). Social agents ( people ) are conscious, intentional, reflective and self-changing, acting as effective causes of society. Obviously, unlike human beings, social structures are not intentional and as social products are dependent upon human action for their existence, but they lay down the conditions for what we can and cannot do by placing us in various social situations. (Danermark et al., 2002).

Looking from this perspective to the accounts of my respondents, they talked about very important social structures acting powerfully in their life, social, political, economic and legal structures that influenced and determined their decision and process of immigration. And to name a few of them: immigration institutions, families, and above all, church structures. Even more importantly is the other set of structural powers that were revealed by the findings, which is

the ideational and belief system context of their group that form and exert a certain type of distinct causal power with very real effects in their respective material and social world. This ideational and belief system context enabled and constrained courses of action (ex. immigrating and integrating in Canada, participating in a local church, becoming foster parents, etc.) ; meaning-making and expressing activities (ex. participating in S/R practices, social responsibility for in-group and out-group members, etc.); lived experiences (S/R providing meaning, purpose, forming identity and life style, acting as an enabling coping mechanism) and discursive practices (S/R understandings and discourses, envisioning of Canada as a temporary “promise land”, poetic imaginary and discourse, etc.).

As just explained, the interplay between structure and agency is very important. Bhaskar, presented his transformational model of the connection between social structure and agency as follows:



Source: Bhaskar 1993: 155

In my findings, some of the mediating and hindering effects of the community/church for the participants in their immigration experience are exemplified. The complex relation between the structures of church community act within the same schema of enablement/ constrains, facilitated and imposed from the community/church level and are reproduced/transformed in the lives of the participants, which then as a group reconstitutes it in the social structure of the social

structure of the church. But to render justice to the answers provided by my respondents; from their perspective, the model is incomplete because a third actor is not taken into consideration and in this light, a potentially real entity that may be part of the explanatory mechanism of society and the human agency is invalidated. For them, the ontological background that encompasses the whole transformational process is grounded in God's being, and this holds true especially in the relationship between the believers and the church.

Churches are understood by the Christian believers (my respondents included) as more than human organisations, it is considered as a direct creation of God and as the body of Christ to which all believers synchronically and diachronically belong. But important for this study is to notice the fact that churches are also socially constructed and as such, they share the following with any other human organizations: they have *structures* which divide responsibility and privilege between persons; they have *activities* to be performed; they have *processes, rules and norms* for performing this activities of which are explicit, overt and formal, although others are implicit, informal and unspoken; and also, they have *bodies of belief codified in creeds and doctrines*, which define their culture. (Garland, 1998). All of these aspects contribute to enablement/constraint process in the identity formation and the lifestyle reproduction of the individuals participating in S/R communities, and in doing so, they contribute to the production, re-enactment and transformation of the social structure in which they participate.

Another important thing to note is the challenging, rather obstructing, causal power of systems like language and culture can have an important role in the immigration process. "Meaning is created from the starting point in different practices and in the interactive communication between members in a community where language is the principal medium. But whereas language no doubt is a medium of communication, it is by no means an independent,

passive or impartial medium.”(Danermark et al., 2002). The same holds true for culture, of which language is one component that can be understood as a permanently renewed human repository of experiences, meanings and symbols. Churches are in many respects subcultures with their particular language, nonverbal symbols, norms, rules and patterns of relationships. Language and culture operated as a challenge (both positively -as a place to belong in an otherwise unfamiliar setting, and negatively -as a place to escape or be stuck) in the acculturation process of the group under study, at two levels: one, *initial* at the time of arrival in Canada and refers to the general Canadian context, and second, *continuous*, especially by constant immersion in ethnic-religious context where some respondents felt “cocooned”. The negative aspects of this situation were not perceived as insurmountable, but were still distinguished as having an obvious “slowing down” effect. Again, it can also be pointed out that the inertia characteristic to religious and/or ethnic communities in relation cultural change, as the respondents pointed out, as the “freezing in time” effect.

At the end of this part of theoretical discussion, I have to admit that looking into the findings of my research, there are many more angles of analysis that can be developed, but because my study is more exploratory in nature, then explanatory, I will leave here the theoretical exploration, and move forward to a practical discussion especially correlating the findings to the practice of social work.

### **Practical discussion**

As evidenced in the findings chapter, Romanian evangelicals expressed a dichotomist understanding in regard to concepts of spirituality and religion, which seems to confirm the earlier findings in work of Allport & Ross (1967) and Jack Hawley (1993). Nevertheless,

beyond the definitional aspect, in using the concepts in conversation, participants often times used them in an interchangeable way. This seems to point to the multi-dimensionality of the phenomenon and to the difficulty to “pin down” its social representations as Pargament (2002) showed. The participants choose to use a different word, “faith”, to express their S/R understanding.

According to James Fowler (1981: 14), known for his model of faith development: to understand the “human quest for relation to transcendence”, the key phenomenon to inspect is not religion or spirituality but faith. In his description of what he calls the “content of faith”, he uses three components: *centers of value* – meaning the “causes, concerns, or persons that consciously or unconsciously have the greatest worth to us ...and give our lives meaning” (p. 227); *images of power* – “the power with which we align ourselves to sustain us in the midst of life’s contingencies” (p. 277); and the *master stories* – “that we tell ourselves and by which we interpret and respond to the events that impinge upon our lives...[constituting] the central premises of [our] sense of life’s meaning (p. 277). An important observation here would be that Fowler tries to establish a working definition for a universal faith, which represents also his final and rarely achieved (6 stage) step – Selfless faith/Universalizing faith. “The persons best described by it have generated faith compositions in which their felt sense of an ultimate environment is inclusive of all being. They have become incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community” (Woski, 1986: 232). This is differently understood by the group under study, as for them “faith” is centered on loyalty to Jesus Christ and to the character of God, the Trinity as revealed in and through him. This ontological particularism has to be considered in any interaction that helping professionals have with Christians or people of Christian faith. In my opinion, this definitional effort, even if not



unimportant as informative tools, cannot replace one of the fundamental interactional principals of our profession, particularly: *start where the client is*. In other words, the more accurate definition of S/R understanding can best be provided by the client himself/herself. Even if general knowledge can be acquired from books, research and study (and this is important in establishing a common language and a referential context) we still have to consider that even members of the same church culture can exhibit subgroup variations and divergent beliefs. People construct the meaning of their lives and faith in different ways, and these constructions may vary in significant ways during the course of their life and their association with different social/church structures. Paulino advises human service professionals to learn from their client's culture that they work with, "as an integral part of their professional development if effective services are to be developed and delivered". (Paulino, 1998:70)

Furthermore, the importance and manner of addressing S/R issues in social work practice is shaped by the worker's beliefs and experience. As social workers, attempting a better understanding of a different ethnic-religious culture, we should be aware that "understanding ethnic and minority cultures is shaped not only by the nature of these cultures, but by the culture of the observer" (Dumbrill, Maiter: 1996: 89). In other words, the religious beliefs and/or ethnic biases of helping professionals have meaning and relevance for those with whom they interact. And these religious beliefs (or lack of them) and eventual ethnic biases can influence their practices in a significant way, as referred in the answers provided by the participants. At the other end, when our clients perceive any of these covert or obvious biases, the working relationship is deeply damaged by mistrust, lack of involvement and cooperation.

Lastly, I want to point out how the various themes found in the literature were present in the discourse of my respondents also. Alongside other research that finds that people with a high

level of involvement and deep S/R commitments have larger social networks, more contact with network members, more types of social support received, and more favorable perceptions of the quality of their social relationships (Bradley 1995; Ellison & George 1994; Taylor & Chatters 1988). My research reveals how these social goods are present in Romanian evangelicals' immigration experience. Paz's (2004) concept of "spirituality of trauma", referring to how people find solace and how spirituality acts like a resource, as an enabler in the sense that it enhanced their resilience in coping with the hardships inherent to the immigration process was a dominant theme. This together with an emphasis on the essential role their religious-ethnic community played in integrating pre-established socio-cultural structures of local churches helped them to adapt and transition to the larger Canadian context and alleviate some of the acculturative stress. As a counter-reaction, they also created another specific set of problems and hindrances. This harmonization with the previous findings in the literature once again accentuates the importance of social aspects to which S/R understandings have and their unfolding in the immigration process and life in general of our clients.

### **Limitations of the study**

Qualitative research allows preservation of the extent and complexity of the essence of the respondents' experiences, yet at the same time, no qualitative study can avoid the potential problem of the researcher's subjective bias. This is especially true when the area of investigation involves such emotionally charged and personally relevant topics as spirituality and religion. Ideally, this kind of research could be done by a group of researchers who can consult and balance their interpretations that would result to guarding against personal biases. Time constraints of a Master's degree, limited finances and resources prevented the formation of such ideal collaboration.

Likewise, IPA guidelines recommend a sample size of three to six participants (Smith, 2004), a larger-than-recommended sample size, additional poetic inquiry method of gathering and analyzing data, and the above mentioned constraints mentioned above, limited the researcher's ability to fully apply the poetic inquiry and IPA principles of complex interpretation and idiographic analysis.

Furthermore, because this study was descriptive and interpretative in nature rather than correlational or experimental, its results are not necessarily applicable to all Romanian evangelicals and their immigration process. Nonetheless, it is aspired that helping professionals will have a better understanding of their spiritual and emigrational journey, thus enabling them to be better equipped when interacting with clients in a professional settings.

Another limitation to be considered is the lack of socio-demographic diversity of the study as almost all the respondents were middle aged, middle class and disproportionately (6 out of 7) university or college educated. The findings of this study might therefore be representative only of the experience of a small (and privileged) subset of individuals, even in the targeted ethno-religious group. This could not be avoided as the participants were self-selected, but more diversity could reveal aspects that still remain unexplored.

### **Implications for practice and research**

Based on the findings of this study, a possible spiritually sensitive practice model in working with specific ethno-religious groups could be developed, as follows:

- Respect the client's S/R understandings. (Note: This does not mean not challenging them when oppressive or unjust. But the *manner* and the *content* of how we communicate and act is equally important for producing desired effects)
- Be aware of personal S/R understandings (or lack of them) and their role in the interaction with client/s
- Research ahead of time to facilitate a common language and establish referentiality (a common ground that discursively and practically helps to understand client's S/R referents and aid establish rapport)
- Listen to the clients' own definition and self-expression of his/her spirituality/religion
- Utilize the clients own S/R criteria for determining problem resolution
- Employ the S/R network of community resources and influencers (if appropriate) in intervention strategies.

The study also reveals a large area of research to be charted in each of its findings' components. Due to the limited amount of time and space for this study, many of the data findings remained underdeveloped. Suggestions for follow up research could include answering questions like: "What effects does severing ties with such ethno-religious communities have in the life of people and what kind of appropriate counseling and help do they need as a result of such experience?" Or, "In what manner do the gender understandings, produced and reproduced in such communities influence the development of marriages and/or women's self-perceptions?"

This study is one of the few that explores the benefits for social work research and practice from a critical realist meta-theoretical perspective. In this author's opinion, critical realism is a very noticeably absent in the educational curriculum of social work schools. Its integrative power of some of the best features of positivism and constructivism, without just conflating the two, its explanatory power and creativity, recommend it as a necessary addition to every student's research tool box. Subsequently, another important area of research to be advanced is the intersectionality between critical realism and social work and its relevance to our profession.

## Chapter7: **Conclusion**

Social work as a profession has a heterogeneous nature and an inherent openness and flexibility that allow it to transform and respond to the variety of social problems and injustices faced by our clients. Especially nowadays, in an environment of ever evolving, multi-faceted, multi-developmental clusters of synchronically interacting variations of very diverse paradigms and grand narratives, technological advances and socio-political change, this eclectic nature of social work is tested and pushed to the limits. But more importantly, these forces are at work in the lives of our clients and many of them find meaningful answers to some of the deepest existential questions in their spiritual and religious understandings and in the embrace of their respective faith communities. It is the framework that provides structure and purpose to their living and incorporates a particular communal and creedal history that forms and informs their choices and life-styles. These realities have to be considered in interactions with clients.

As evidenced in this study, the author does not subscribe to the idea that relationship between social work and spirituality/religion has to be one of conflict or disregard. On the contrary, my perspective is one of harmony and integration. This is sustained, among other things, by the historical development of social work profession; by the fact that most of our clients already operate from this integrative framework; and also by the fact that the principle of S/R diversity does not apply just to our clients, but to ourselves as social workers too – all social workers have a vision of what constitutes the general welfare of society, and we learn to respect and even to utilize this creative diversity in our work. As a result, respect for S/R diversity should be of equal importance to other types of diversity.

This being said, some tensions linger and have to be acknowledged. For example, there is a risk of operating from a reductionist perspective. A spiritual reductionism perspective means that no other aspects of reality should be taken under consideration but the S/R ones and/or material needs may be addressed only as a way of getting to the spiritual aspects of clients, deemed as more important. This could lead to the false conclusion that if spiritual problems are addressed, other problems will dissipate, or S/R is a salve for inadequate material resources. On the other hand, reductionism can be observed as operating in a secularist perspective, which denies or ignores the spiritual dimensions of life and discredits the value and contribution of S/R.

Another tension could be an unbalanced and oppressive practice of SW as enacted by social workers operating from an S/R perspective. Examples of this could be attempts to override client's self-determination in the efforts of these social workers in addressing S/R matters. Again, from the other side, social workers could manifest discrimination and S/R phobia that can be equally unbalanced and oppressive. As example, in their challenge to pursue social justice for certain groups, social workers might condone prejudice and discrimination against certain religious groups with whom they disagree (Ressler, 1998). Important to acknowledge here that the rise of more fundamentalist religious expressions, which are often on the opposing side of particular equity issues, can lead to the erroneous conclusion that all S/R groups are opposed to social justice efforts.

In conclusion, the author can only hope that from studying the S/R understandings and the variety of social supports provided among them, perhaps some similar social programs which are aimed to helping new immigrants to Canada will strive to emulate the positive aspects and tries to avoid the negative ones. For such a program to exist and provide formal and informal

types of support, not only political and economic powers have to be involved, but also local communities to be galvanized by the vision of caring, loving and providing for the similar “Other”.



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DATE: March 24, 2013



## Appendix A

### LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT

#### Exploring the role and significance of Religion/Spirituality in the Immigration Experience of Romanian Evangelicals: A Critical Realist Perspective

##### Investigators:

###### Student Investigator:

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Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study I am conducting as part of my Master's degree in the Department of Social Work at MacMaster University under the supervision of Professor Stephanie Baker Collins. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part.

##### Purpose of the Study

Over the years, the interest of spiritual/religious aspects in the life of people interacting with helping professionals (e.g. social workers) fluctuated. Nevertheless, in the recent years an awareness of the importance of this topic emerges. Considering spirituality/religion as an important and significant part of human experience the purpose of this study is to discover how this dimension helps Romanian Evangelical immigrants to transition and adapt to Canadian context.

This study will focus on your self-understanding(s) of spirituality/religion, allowing for similarities, differences or overlapping characteristics of these terms as you define them. I want to explore the role and meaning that these aspects have in your life, but predominantly related to the experience of immigration to Canada.

##### Procedures involved in the Research

I will ask you to write a poem drawing on your personal experience, expressing your perception on spirituality/religion and what role it plays in the experience of immigration. You can choose the form of your poetry (free verse; rhythm, etc.), its length and the language in which it is written.

In the interview part of the study, I will ask you open-ended questions but following a semi-structured design, allowing you to express your personal perspective in answering them. For example, I will ask you questions like: *What is your definition of spirituality? What role does spirituality/religion (in your own definition) have in your life? What role does spirituality/religion (in your own definition) have in your immigration experience?* I will also ask you some demographic/background information like your age and education, religious affiliation, etc. Every interview will be approximately one hour in length and will take place in a mutually agreed upon location. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded and handwritten notes will be taken to facilitate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis

##### Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts

The risks involved in participating in this study are minimal. You may feel uncomfortable answering some questions or you could feel emotionally upset talking about your immigration experience and remember it as traumatic. Another worry might be about speaking in English. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Further, you can choose the language in which the interview is conducted, either English or Romanian.

### **Potential Benefits**

The research will provide an opportunity for you to reflect on your personal spiritual journey and its significance in the immigration experience. It will make visible the importance of spiritual/religious aspects for the Romanian Evangelical population. This could help in creating better, more holistic, culturally and spiritually sensitive services and it will offer to academic community a much needed understanding of the link between spirituality and experiences of immigration and processes of transitioning and adapting in a new country.

### **Confidentiality**

All information you provide is considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study, though, with your permission anonymous quotations may be used, after you will have an opportunity to review them by email or phone call. However, we are often identifiable through the stories we tell. Please keep this in mind in deciding what to tell me. Once the study is complete, an archive of the data, without identifying information, will be maintained for two years (until 25<sup>th</sup> May, 2015) in digital form on an exterior hard drive, password protected. The data is maintained for reasons of accountability and for the possibility that further research is needed. After this period, all gathered data will be deleted. Only I and my supervisor will have access to the information.

### **Participation and Withdrawal**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is your choice to be part of the study or not. Please don't feel pressured to participate just because you know me. I will still have enough participants for my study even if you aren't able to participate. If you decide to be part of the study, you can stop (withdraw), from the interview, for whatever reason, even after signing the consent form or part-way through the study or up until approximately July, 2013. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

### **Information about the Study Results**

I expect to have this study completed by approximately August, 2013. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

### **Questions about the Study**

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at: [ivanmc@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ivanmc@mcmaster.ca) or 226-374-2112

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142  
c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support  
E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

I very much look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.

**CONSENT**

By signing this consent form, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities.

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- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Marius Cosmin Ivan, of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until approximately July, 2013.
- I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the thesis and/or publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous.
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant (Printed) \_\_\_\_\_

1. I agree that the interview can be audio recorded.

YES    NO

2. I would prefer the interview to be held in:

English    Romanian

3. I want to review my included quotations

YES    NO

Phone    E-mail

4.  YES, I would like to receive a summary of the study's results.

Please send them to this email address:

\_\_\_\_\_

Or to this mailing address:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

NO , I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results.

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions/Întrebări interviu

- 1) *What is your definition of spirituality? How do you understand spirituality and/or religion? Are they similar, different, are there intersecting characteristics?*  
*Care este propria ta definiție a spirituității? Ce înțelegi tu prin spiritualitate și/sau religie? Sunt ele similar, diferite sau au caracteristici care se intersectează?*
- 2) *What meaning(s) do you attach to spirituality/religion in your own personal experience?*  
*Ce semnificați(e) atașezi spiritalității/religiei în experiența ta personală?*
- 3) *Did your understanding of spirituality/religion has changed since you came to Canada? If yes, in what way?*  
*S-a schimbat în vre-un fel înțelegerea ta cu privire la spiritualitate/religie de când ai venit în Canada? Dacă da, în ce fel?*
- 4) *What role does spirituality/religion (in your own definition) have in your life?*  
*Ce rol joacă spiritualitatea/religia (în propria ta definiție) în viața ta?*
- 5) *What role does spirituality/religion (in your own definition) have in your immigration experience?*  
*Ce rol are/sau a avut spiritualitatea/religia (în propria ta definiție) în experiența imigrării așa cum ai trait-o tu?*
- 6) *What role (if any) does your spiritual/religious community plays in your immigration experience?*  
*Ce rol (dacă este cazul) are comunitatea ta religioasă/spiriuală în experiența imigrării tale?*
- 7) *Can you provide examples of how your spirituality/religion helped you transition and adapt to Canadian context?*  
*Poți să oferi te rog cateva exemple cu privire la cum spiritualitatea/religia ta te-a ajutat să te adaptezi la contextul canadian?*
- 8) *Can you provide examples of how your spirituality/religion hindered your transitioning and adapting to Canadian context?*  
*Poți să oferi câteva exemple cu privire la cum spiritualitatea/reliata ta a împiedicat procesul de tranziție și adaptare la contextul Canadian?*
- 9) *What would you like a helping professional (e.g. social worker) to know about your spirituality/religion in dealing with your issues (or your family)?*  
*Ce ai dori ca o persoană din profesiile de ajutorare (ex. Asistenți sociali) să stie cu privire la spiritualitatea/religia ta atunci când lucrează cu tine sau familia ta?*

**Appendix C**  
**Demographical Information Sheet**

7) Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

8) Age: \_\_\_\_\_

9) Educational Background \_\_\_\_\_

10) Professional Background \_\_\_\_\_

11) Spiritual/Religious affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

12) How long ago did you arrive in Canada \_\_\_\_\_

**Please write below a self-reflective poem expressing your understanding of spirituality/religion as it relates to your immigration experience (you can choose the form, length and language of the poem.**



## Appendix D

### Table –“Dichotomous view of spirituality and religion” list of citations

#### DANIELA

***Spirituality* – Expresses highest values; Following God; Playfield of faith; Internalized beliefs, attitudes and behaviors; Private; Real; Social Responsibility; Internal motivation; Continuous (time independent); Adaptive /Growing, Dynamic; Self-appropriated; Reflexive;**

***Religion* – Rules/Constrains; Fixed; Traditions; Social uniformity and conformity; Public; Construct; Image; Framework of development; Discontinuous (time dependent);**

Spirituality is the pursuit of greater purpose, of significance in the ‘big scheme of things’, of value that transcends the human limitations and mortality... The measure of spirituality in our life is the extent to which we seek God, the understanding of His will and power, and the implementation of His plans for us, within our means and to the best of our ability. Spirituality is, therefore, the play field of FAITH – the mindset derived from the presence of active, genuine faith

Religion is just a set of rules and regulations one ascribes to – a ‘minimum necessary’ standard which has more value in projecting an outward image – a sort of PR (public relations) strategy – rather than make a true and lasting difference to our inherent behavior and aspirations.

I see religion as a means of external constraint – a method of imposing conformity and social uniformity – which produces results merely through fear of punishment, or negative reinforcement. Religion drives people to ‘appear more than they are’ – which translates into wearing a mask [in public], often contrasting from visible behavior.

However, faith is the internal constraint – a means to inspire a fervent pursuit of Godly behavior and likeness – which produces results through hope of reward, or positive reinforcement. Faith drives people to desire to ‘be more than they are’ – which translates into real actions and tangible results.

Spirituality and religion are different. I see genuine spirituality and religion as two separate sets, which, depending on the individual, may never intersect, but which, ideally would aim to slowly overlap each other, with Faith winning the laurels. This should be true of all individuals who take the ‘growth in the knowledge of Christ’ seriously and actively pursue this as a life-long journey towards righteousness. Religion has merits for establishing the framework for children and newly-converted Christians. As they grow and/or mature in the knowledge of the Scriptures, the external constraint of religion should be less and less needed, since Faith – the internal motivator – takes the driver seat.

Religion might tell me that helping others is important, and I might try to pay my 10% to the Church, join in any charitable activities the church organizes... However, faith tells me that

helping others is my higher purpose – the reason God put me on Earth, and that anything else I achieve here is equal to a big zero, unless I became God's blessing to others. My true contribution to society and the world history is only as big as the extent to which I did good to other people. Nothing else matters in the big picture.

We understand 'living faith' to mean 'active faith' and strive to be as active as possible in our church community.

First thing I would like any professional to know, is that my religion is a fixed standard, but my faith is a dynamic force! Just because I adhere to a religion, does not mean that my system of values is not expanding, that my perspective is doomed, that my attitudes don't change.

...spirituality and religion are not the same thing. And when you are talking spirituality you are talking motivation, when you are talking religion you are talking constraints. And to me religion is fix standard, whereas my spirituality is forever changing, a dynamic system of values, it expands, it always grows, it's shifting, it's moving.

Well I think religion is pretty much a fixed thing where as my spirituality is a matter of growth, it's a matter of perspective. So just because I adhere to a religion that may look like it's getting old or outdated, it doesn't mean that my own prospective is not growing, it's not developing, is not evolving over time... So my spirituality is not the same as anybody else's in church. I mean there might be some similarities.

## **AMANDA**

***Spirituality – Relationship with God; Personal; Expresses highest values; Living by the Bible***

***Religion- Authoritative; Narrow group loyalties; Imposed rules/codes***

...religion, they regard religion like, ok, you're part of a church, you go to church, you follow whatever the priest [in English] or priest [in Romanian] whatever says, you follow the rules, you are part from the community, you don't break any other rules...

Now, to me, both words have negative connotation, because they don't describe what I experience and don't describe what I call faith.

Spirituality to me means a personal relationship with God of the Bible. A God that is real for me like a person to whom I have a relation with. [...] I'm trying to live to live out the principles which are written in the Bible and which I believe, ok? That's spirituality from my point of view. Now religion, from my point of view, again, to me religion, is just being part of a certain, let not say denomination, anyway, from a certain religion, Catholics, Orthodox, Baptist and so on, and being a good person of following what the priest, the pastor says and so on and you are not outside, you know, you're just there and behave yourself. That's religion to me.

...spirituality has a major role in my life....meaning that not because I have to, but because of my relation with my Creator, with my God.

## **PAUL**

***Spirituality* – Living by the Spirit/Following God; Constitutive**

***Religion* – Framework of development; Informs highest values**

Generally a man who is spiritual, lives according to the Spirit and that comes from the fact that God has placed in us something special, which is the Spirit, and because of it is impossible to be a spiritual man and not religious man.

Their religion, at least Christianity, as I see it, helps the man discover the Spirit within him, the source of the spirit and helps him, in other words, by Word of God and Scripture, to fulfill these spiritual needs.

## **VICTOR**

***Spirituality*- God's initiative in reconnecting with humanity; Living by the Bible**

***Religion* – Human effort to reconnect with God**

Well, for me, like I said, religion is human effort, but my view, my Christian view is, my connection with the Creator actually happened outside of context of religion. My efforts to get that back. So my view, is being biblical, [...] is that God came down and save me.

## **LAURA**

***Spirituality* – A way of life in faith; Relationship with God, Personal; Self-appropriated; Growing/Dynamic; Real; Constitutive**

***Religion* – Exterior; Codified doctrines and traditions; Impersonal**

I believe there is a big difference between religion and spirituality. Religion incorporates beliefs and certain doctrine. For instance, Christian religion and Muslim religion umm... Whereas spirituality is the way you live your faith, it's the way you manifest your faith and its life relationship with your God.

Spirituality is the way you live your faith, it's the way you manifest your faith, and its life relationship with your God.

To me spirituality means the way that you actually live your faith. It is...the things that you do, the things that you ask and receive answer from your Creator. So it's relationship and it's alive. Umm it happens in time. It is not something that was done or written in a certain point at time, it happens to me, every day, every minute, and every hour.

Spirituality is very important in my life. It plays a very important role in everything that I do and it definitely influences the way I think.

## **GEORGE**

***Spirituality – Purpose in life.***

***Religion – Tradition, codes, rules, imposed, fixed, rigid; Discontinuous***

Spirituality is something that would lead you to do something that is meaningful, in my opinion. It has to have... that's where the sense of purpose comes from.

Ah...so religion and spirituality what's the difference?[...] I wouldn't necessarily like the word religion specifically because first of all, religion has been taken to a little a bit of an extreme to the fact that instead of becoming a doctrine, you know, a biblical doctrine, it turned into a very legalistic traditions that at times, not all the time but at times, they imposed some things that are not according to the Bible; you can't call traditions something that is... traditions is not the same as doctrine... whenever traditions don't change, they become something I call religion, something that is very rigid, something that never changes in some situations.

## **ANDREEA**

***Spirituality – Personal; Following God; Constitutive; Living by the Bible***

***Religion – Rules; Traditions***

...my definition of spirituality, I think it would have to be a constant connection with the living God. To be spiritual is to recognize one's dependence on God, to recognize his guidance, his presence, his plan in people's life. So that would be the first part of your question. How do I understand spirituality, the way I understand it is , it is a way of life, there is no separation between everyday life, the physical, I guess the body and mind ,man or human being and the spiritual man.

Religion...so I guess spirituality and religion in my opinion they are not the same. Religion I, I think and I see it as a set of rules, regulations, a ticket, if you will, of do's and don'ts.[...] Being spiritual I don't think as a formula, it's sets free, it's nothing I do that I do will make God love more. That's kind of how I see; it's recognizing what God did for, for us, accepting... (pause) that we are his children. So I think religion is more of a set of rules then, that's how I see religion. ...as I mention it before, for me there is no such thing as I'm spiritual and then I'm not, it's part of who I am and I so see it.

I think it's important for everyone to know that spirituality for Christians is not a tradition, and a tradition is more or less established opinions formed over many years but it's more of a doctrine which is established teaching based on the bible and for us Christians, the Bible is our spiritual authority.