

ANCIENT WISDOM, STIGMATISED KNOWLEDGE, AND SACRED
 LANDSCAPES: ONTOLOGIES AND EPISTEMOLOGIES OF NEW AGE
 CULTURE IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA*

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The four articles in this section deal with anthropological study of New Age beliefs and practices in post-Soviet Russia. They are in part the result of a joint German–Russian research project titled *New Religious Cultures in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Ideology, Social Networks, Discourses*, supported by the German Research Foundation and the Russian Foundation for Basic Research. In this introductory paper I will briefly discuss the principal outcomes of this research as well as general analytical issues related to the field of New Age studies both in global and local (post-Soviet) contexts.

NEW AGENCY, NEW ONTOLOGIES

As an emic category, the term New Age goes back to the astrological Age of Aquarius associated with expectations of a new historical epoch, when human mental and physiological capabilities will change dramatically. The genesis of New Age culture can be traced at least to the turn of the 20th century (in particular in connection with the evolution of Spiritualism, Theosophy, Anthroposophy and several other spiritual teachings and practices), but its global popularity comes in the last decades of the 20th century.

In a narrow sense New Age is usually understood as beliefs and practices of a chiliastic and eschatological nature that were formed in an ‘alternative’ or ‘countercultural’ milieu in Western Europe and the United States in the 1960s (Hanegraaff 1996: 96–97). A broader understanding of New Age culture implies a diverse set of beliefs and practices focused on expansion of physiological capabilities of the human body (‘extrasensory’ perception, telepathy and telekinesis, alternative medicine and spiritual healing), the spiritual and moral transformation of mankind, interaction with various superhuman agents and transpersonal forces (aliens, ‘spiritual teachers’, ‘galactic consciousness’,

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'energy fields', etc.) by means of particular psychophysical techniques, mainly so-called 'channeling' (Hanegraaff 1996: 23–41; Wood 2007; Gutierrez 2015). On the whole, New Age ideology is oriented toward the moral and spiritual transformation of human individuality through self-improvement and the achievement of fundamentally new harmonious social relations. One of the central ideas of the New Age worldview is the so-called 'holistic principle' that implies the integrity of the universe, mutual interdependence of all processes occurring in it, as well as the unbreakable connection between microcosm and macrocosm, i.e. between every single human being and the universe. This worldview, sometimes represented in conventional natural sciences terms, aims to replace "dualism between spirit and matter in its various derivations from Christian asceticism to Cartesian dualism" (Hanegraaff 1996: 119). In addition, one of the key aspects of New Age epistemology is 'scientism' (Hammer 2001: 201–330), which employs the social image of science and rational knowledge in general, as well as various scientific and parascientific discourses to construct religious spiritual metaphors, narrative models and practices.

Viewing New Age as a religious culture, we have to remember, on the other hand, that many present day social scientists criticise the usefulness of the very term 'religion' as an analytical concept. It is considered to be shaped by modern European and Christian culture. The opposition of religious and secular when applied to studies of non-European and non-Christian cultures seems to make our understanding of religion even more problematic (Huss 2014). This criticism seems to be generally plausible. However, it is possible to take another analytical approach provided by the cognitive science of religion and ontological anthropology. Here, in particular, we are invited to study religious ideas and practices in terms of agency attributed to both human and non-, semi-, or superhuman participants of broadly understood ritual processes. In this sense, New Age could be regarded as a new religious ontology where gods, angels and demons are replaced by extraterrestrials, 'spiritual teachers', 'surviving hominoids' and poltergeists. The specifics of this ontology have yet to be analysed by researchers, but it is obviously linked to the above-mentioned holistic worldview, where boundaries conventional for European modernity between material and spiritual, individual and collective, human body and its environment are erased or blurred. Central to this ontology is the image of holistic personality, which dramatically expands the expected physical and spiritual capacities of every human being regardless of his/her position in society, educational and economic status, etc. New Age theories of this kind include the ideology of 'human potential' declaring the task of personal growth and latent extraordinary capacities. In practice, this idea is often represented in terms of 'paranormal' abilities of extrasensory perception, telepathy and telekinesis, channelling and spiritual healing. New Age thus forms not only a new worldview, but also new rituals, modes of behaviour, and social practices. Finally, ecologically oriented ideas, also grounded in a holistic worldview that renounces anthropocentrism and also erases the boundaries between man and the natural world, play an important role in New Age culture.

This novelty, though, does not seem to be radical. Thus, for example, alien abduction narratives, which were a significant part of New Age culture both in the West and in the USSR, can be analysed, as the American researcher David Hufford (2005) did, in the context of the psychosomatic experience of sleep paralysis and compared with a rather wide range of beliefs and narratives known in a variety of cultures, from the stories of

the house spirit who strangled Russian peasants in their sleep to the stories of incubi and succubi in "The Hammer of Witches". However, the unity of human experience and typological similarities of its cultural representations do not contradict the emergence of new social and cognitive models on which New Age is based.

THE CULTIC MILIEU AND POPULAR CULTURE

Western New Age of the 1960–1970s was a form of social and cultural protest and, at the same time, a kind of eschatological movement. In the Soviet bloc, it looked more like a technocratic or 'technognostic' utopia. On the other hand, it was also a kind of implicitly dissident movement opposed to official communist ideology. In the Soviet Union, New Age ideas were mainly shared by educated urban technical professionals, but also by many members of the academic elite, artists, writers, and musicians. Sometimes it is supposed that Soviet New Age beliefs and practices were merely a local appropriation of the global and especially American forms of 'esoteric' culture. It seems, however, that we should rather talk about the parallel development and mutual influence of this culture in the United States, the USSR and Europe. Evidence of this mutual interest and influence is, for instance, the book by the American journalists Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder, *Psychic Discoveries behind the Iron Curtain* (1970), which stimulated contacts and cooperation between American and Soviet parapsychologists and psychics.

One of the first sociological models of New Age culture was proposed by the British researcher Colin Campbell in his article "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization" (1972). Here he discussed the 'cultic milieu' as informal groups and communication media serving as means of cultural innovation and diffusion of alternative beliefs, practices, and parascientific doctrines. Campbell argued that these networks did not tend to form stable social structures and institutions and were united by a common ideology of 'spiritual search' and a medial context (journals, pamphlets, lectures, informal gatherings, etc.). Without elaborating on the genesis of the 'cultic milieu', Campbell emphasised its alternative and partially stigmatised status in the Western society and, at the same time, its 'adaptive potential' in the context of possible change and evolution of social and ideological paradigms in the late 20th century.

Although New Age groups existing in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and early 1980s were part of the cultural underground and were often not able to share their ideas and practices openly, their overall social setting generally resembled what was described by Campbell. However, by the end of the 1980s, there was an explosive growth in the popularity of New Age culture in the Soviet Union, which also extended to the 1990s. As a result, associations, institutes, and even academies of paranormal researchers, various forms of commercialised magical and mantic practices (astrology, divination, healing, etc.), new sacred landscapes ('places of power', 'anomalous zones'), and autochthonous new religious movements appeared in the former Soviet republics. The first generation of these religious movements, which grew out of late Soviet New Age associations (for example, the USMALOS Great White Brotherhood or the Last Testament Church), was oriented towards charismatic leadership and explicitly apocalyptic expectations, this probably explained by the general crisis of the Soviet symbolic universe and the legacy of the Cold War. The next wave of post-Soviet New Age associations (for exam-

ple, the Anastasian movement) returned to non-institutionalised forms of interaction and usually did not proclaim any articulated apocalyptic views. By the beginning of the new century, New Age both in the West and in the post-Soviet countries had become part and parcel of popular culture with its various forms and ideologies of 'alternative' knowledge.

Popular interest in New Age ideas and practices in the last Soviet years and in the first post-Soviet decade was stimulated by the overall religious boom of the late 1980–1990s, when paranormal research was quite easily accompanied by the revival of Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, successful activities of Western evangelical missions, etc. This obviously left an imprint on religious culture in contemporary Russia, where, for example, Orthodox identity often does not contradict personal enthusiasm for New Age beliefs and rituals.

PERENNIALISM, RESENTMENT AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

One significant component of New Age historiosophy is perennialism, that is, the theory that "all religions shared a common origin in a single perennial (or primeval or primordial) religion that had subsequently taken a variety of forms" (Sedgwick 2004: 24) or "claims that there are mystical experiences common to all religious traditions, experiences which provide an immediate direct contact with a transcendent, absolute reality" (Hammer 2001: 344). In post-Soviet New Age culture, perennialism is usually represented by the concept of lost, forgotten or spoiled authentic knowledge once allegedly possessed by the ancestors of a particular ethnic group or of all mankind. The desire to recover or acquire this ancient wisdom in one way or another seems to be common for many New Age teachings and practices. This, however, is only one version of a general ideology of alternative knowledge that becomes more and more popular in contemporary societies. New Age in this context interacts with a variety of parascientific doctrines, from alternative linguistics to cryptozoology.

The study of this ideology and its social context can employ the concept of stigmatised knowledge proposed by the American political scientist Michael Barkun. By stigmatised knowledge he means "claims to truth that the claimants regard as verified despite the marginalization of those claims by the institutions that conventionally distinguish between knowledge and error – universities, communities of scientific researchers, and the like" (Barkun 2003: 26). In other words, social value is ascribed here predominantly or exclusively to officially rejected and persecuted knowledge – the importance and social significance of ideas and practices appears to be related to the pressure exerted on them by official institutions. The model of stigmatised knowledge is among the principal forms of conspiratorial epistemology characteristic of contemporary popular culture (Barkun 2016). It is not simply a question of challenging class or institutional monopoly on rationality and science. The image of alternative knowledge and technology in this context seems to be a significant symbol of political struggle and protest and at the same time an integral part of individual holistic agency not mediated by social institutions and political systems.

Many post-Soviet New Age doctrines and movements proceed from the idea of stigmatised knowledge. Such doctrines, as a rule, are characterised not only by a perennial-

ist but also by a conspiratorial pathos: it is assumed that the loss of ancient knowledge was due to the will of powerful conspirators wishing to do harm to the Russian people, or to imaginary 'Aryans', or to all of mankind. Post-Soviet New Age ideology in Russia is often oriented toward conservative nationalism, imperial resentment, and conspiracy theories. It is symptomatic, for example, that despite the essential role feminism played in the formation and evolution of Western New Age culture, in Russia, on the contrary, New Age teachings largely cultivate ideas of gender inequality where the subordinate role of women is considered to be a traditional value.

It is possible to say that contemporary New Age ideologies follow in many respects the general trends of popular culture, including collective political imagination, which in Russia abounds in distinctly nationalistic and conspiratorial views. The answer, however, may be not so simple. The merging of New Age spirituality with conspiracy theories and right-wing conservatism can be observed in the Western Europe and the United States as well, so that in 2011, the British scholars Charlotte Ward and David Voas even proposed a special term – 'conspirituality' – to identify this phenomenon (Ward and Voas 2011; Aspren and Dyrendal 2015). One of the possible reasons here is that New Age, as a new religious ontology, needs language, ideas and narratives to represent and discuss the problem of evil, and conspiracy theories provide the most relevant opportunities for this discussion.

The following four articles focus on various facets and forms of New Age culture in post-Soviet Russia. The paper by Julia Andreeva deals with perennialist views of the Vedic tradition elaborated by followers of the Anastasia movement. The Anastasians, who establish intentional communities or ecovillages, consider the pre-Christian past of Russia to be the source of 'genuine' values, traditions, and practices. The idea of ancestral culture to be revived or rediscovered by contemporary Russians is at the core of the movement's beliefs and practices. This restoration of ancestral knowledge also implies living in harmony with the natural environment. The perennialist ideology of the Anastasians results not only in spiritual practices and rituals but in particular forms of materiality that appear to be a part of broader culture of 'authentic' and 'ecologic' consumption. The article by Andreeva demonstrates how the 'invented tradition' of Ivan-tea consumption promoted by the Anastasians and associated with imaginary ancient pagan culture fits commercialised production of organic products and souvenirs in today's Russia.

The article by Julia Senina focuses on sacred landscapes and forms of ritualistic culture created by New Age practitioners in Russia. The 'places of power' located near the Siberian village of Okunevo in many aspects resemble globally famous New Age sacred sites such as Sedona or Glastonbury. The Okunevo sites form a complicated sacred landscape shared by various religious and spiritual groups including even certain Russian Orthodox believers. Senina shows how the formation of these shrines in the early post-Soviet years was shaped both by New Age activists and some members of the academia who tended to interpret archaeological data in 'alternative' ways.

The article by Andrei Tiukhtiaev also deals with 'alternative' archaeology and history as sources for New Age inspiration in Russia. The megalithic Bronze era burial monuments discussed in the paper are also considered places of power by the Anastasians and some other New Age groups and movements. Perennialist and traditionalist sentiments of pilgrims to the dolmens of the North Caucasus are largely represented

by the narratives of stigmatised historical knowledge which, as Tiukhtiaev argues, continually oscillate between categories of religious and secular.

The article by Sergei Shtyrkov concentrates on the North Ossetian nativist religious movement, which also proceeds from perennialist interpretations of local folklore, ethnographic, and historical data, but at the same time employs various concepts and ideas borrowed from Western esotericism and practical psychology. The search for legitimacy by the local religious activists relies heavily on various forms of stigmatised knowledge and results in re-description of religion in general and re-construction of religious systems in particular.

Both these articles and other recent academic publications dealing with New Age ideas, beliefs, and practices in post-Soviet Russia prove again that they represent an intellectually and psychologically attractive ontology, successfully competing with cosmologies and discourses habitual to modern Western societies, i.e. Christianity and other world religions, as well as rationalist and positivist worldviews. In this sense, the social and cultural significance of New Age for post-Soviet popular culture cannot be overestimated.

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