

“New Religious Culture in late and post-Soviet Russia: Ideology, social Networks, Discourses”

Project Summary (English)

The term New Age (in the following NA) (New Age spirituality / culture) refers to a number of significant developments and movements which are characteristic for contemporary post-secular societies. As an emic term of self-identification, NA refers to the astrological meaning of The Age of Aquarius which is linked to the expectance of a new historical era which brings about a radical change of psychological and physiological possibilities to mankind. In spite of the seemingly disparate, even contradictory meanings, ideas, beliefs and practices of NA, nevertheless all of them can be studied as parts of one esoteric culture, with an inner logic and tied together with a number of globalized social processes. In a more narrow sense of the term, NA is usually understood as a set of beliefs and practices of a chiliastic and eschatological character, which constituted the countercultural milieu of Western European countries and the USA in the 1960s [Hanegraaff 1996: 96-97]. A wider notion of the term culture of NA comprises a diverse selection of beliefs and practices oriented towards expanding the physiological potential, including the physical and mental enhancement of the human body, a spiritual and ethical transformation of the individual human being and society, interaction with superhuman powers and agencies, as well as access to transpersonal energies received by help of special psycho-physical techniques. The ideas of NA were, altogether, oriented towards a fundamental moral rebirth of the human individual by way of selfperfection and by achieving principal new harmonious social relations. The project focuses on the history and social dimensions of New Age culture in the USSR of the 1960s until the 1980s, as well as in Post-Soviet Russia. Even though New Age culture in the late Soviet and post-Soviet countries should be analyzed in the context of global social and cultural trends, it seems important to respond to the question, which factors did exactly determine the genesis and the evolution of ideas and practices in the New Age of the Soviet culture. At the same time, it seems extremely important to learn the role of culture in the context of New Age social and ideological continuity between the Late Soviet and Post-Soviet eras, as well as social functions and ideas of New Age practices in modern Russia. The project will certainly contribute to the new empirical knowledge about the Soviet and post-Soviet culture, as well as the global socioideological and cultural processes in the modern world, the elaboration of new methodologies in the study of modern mass culture and religious practices, and the development of interdisciplinary and international scientific cooperation in the field of Slavonic and Eurasian studies, sociology and anthropology of religion and history of everyday life as well.

This research project is dedicated to the socio-anthropological study of a new religious culture that attracted global attention at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries and that in modern scientific literature is often referred to as “New Age”. The term New Age (in the following – NA) or New Age spirituality/culture as it appears in studies on popular culture, in para-scientific practices and ideologies, is closely linked to other terms, such as esotericism, cultic milieu, occultism / “occulture”, refers to a number of significant developments and movements which are characteristic for contemporary “post-secular” societies. The term, also adapted as an analytic category, came into use by the works of Alice Bailey (1880–1949) and became widespread in Western cultic milieus of the 1970s and 1980s. Meanwhile, it is used by specialists as an umbrella-term for a variety of at first sight diverse ideas, concepts, practices, and narrative forms in contemporary culture (for more details, see Chryssides 2007). As an emic term of self-identification, NA refers to the astrological meaning of “The Age of Aquarius” which is linked to the expectance of a new historical era which brings about a radical change of psychological and physiological possibilities to mankind. In spite of the seemingly disparate, even contradictory meanings, ideas, beliefs and practices of NA, nevertheless all of them can be studied as parts of one “esoteric” culture, with an inner logic and tied together with a number

of globalized social processes (see below). The emergence/genesis of this culture has been traced back to the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (in particular concerning theosophical teachings); global and mass-cultural popularity it has received only in the last decades of the 20th century.

In a narrow sense of the term, NA it is usually understood as a set of beliefs and practices of a chiliastic and eschatological character, which constituted the “countercultural” milieu of Western European countries and the USA in the 1960s (Hanegraaff 1996: 96–97). A wider notion of the term “culture of NA” comprises a diverse selection of beliefs and practices oriented towards expanding the physiological potential, including the physical and mental enhancement of the human body (training of psychic abilities, telepathy and telekinesis, alternative medicine and spiritual healing), a spiritual and ethical transformation of the individual human being and society, interaction with superhuman powers and agencies, as well as access to transpersonal energies (non-local communication, “spiritual teachers”, a “cosmic- galactic consciousness”, psycho-physical techniques, energy fields etc.) – received by help of special psycho-physical techniques, mostly through “channeling” (Hanegraaff 1996: 23–41; Wood 2008). The ideas of NA were, altogether, oriented towards a fundamental moral rebirth of the human individual by way of self-perfection and by achieving principal new harmonious social relations. Thus, one of the characteristics of the *Weltanschauung* of this NA-culture was the so-called “holistic approach”, i.e. the assumption that the Universe is One, that everything that happens within the universe has an impact on everything else, the idea that microcosm and macrocosm (“Above is as Below”) are inseparably connected with each other. Man and the world around him, especially when described in natural scientific terms, are imagined as a result of fields and energies. One of the key aspects of NA epistemology (as in a number of post-secular religious cultures) is “scientism” (Hammer 2001: 201–330), the use of the social image of science and rationalized knowledge as a whole, but also the use of scientific and para-scientific discourses for the construction of religious metaphors, narrative models and practices. In this sense, the culture of NA neighbors on and cross-exchanges with several different forms of para-scientific knowledge (from “alternative history” and crypto-linguistics to the “physics of torsion fields” and cryptozoology), historical forms of magic and occultism (Astrology, mantic practices, Spiritism, etc.), conspirological and nationalist discourses (which have been discussed recently under the term of conspirativity, i. e. “conspirational spirituality”) (Ward & Voas 2011; Aspren & Dyrendal 2015) and ecological movements, social-utopian projects and youth-subcultures. Being moved by an individualistic approach, the ideology of NA has not led to the formation of any distinct social structures, institutions of hierarchies, however, related to according beliefs and practices, it has had a sometimes decisive influence/impact on various religious movements in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, as well as on various social and economic networks (astrological schools, Yoga-courses, communities for the study of paranormal phenomena etc.). Finally, what should be taken into consideration is the fact that during the past decades of the 20th century, ideas, practices and beliefs of the NA in the widest sense of the term have ceased to be only an achievement of some limited groups, but have turned into a significant part and driving force of global popular culture – from practices in everyday life to film and literature. In this sense it is justified to speak of a genealogy and “archeology” of presentday NA in various cultural and social contexts.

Contemporary discourses of specifics, nature and genesis of NA also include the attempt to find a common explanatory model which takes into account global social, ideological and cultural developments in the second half of the 20th century. Factors which have influenced the culture of NA were for instance a strong dissatisfaction with the rational and technologically hypertrophic civilization of modern Western societies, the fragmentation and dissolution of metanarrative ideological and religious models, fears and awareness of the destruction of the environment, as a result of a problematic development of the industrialized society. One of the

first general models of NA was offered in 1972 by the British sociologist Colin Campbell in his article “Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization” (Campbell 1972). The term the cultic milieu was coined to describe social networks which served as cultural innovative motors and as means of diffusion of alternative religious practices and para-scientific doctrines. These networks were striving towards shaping stable structures and institutions and were connected around a general ideology of “spiritual seeking” as well as a context of shared media (journals, pamphlets, lectures, informal meetings etc.). Without dwelling in-depth on genealogical issues of the cultic milieu, Campbell emphasized its role to create an alternative to mainstream society as well as its partly stigmatized status in contemporary Western societies. At the same time, he emphasized its “adaptable potential” in the face of the changing paradigms and evolution of social-ideological paradigms of the late 20th century (especially when applied to man’s changing attitude to and mutual relation with the environment.) In subsequent studies it was often stated that one of the significant ideological features of the culture of NA and its social phenomena (various forms of contemporary eschatology etc.) is the construction of a certain special status of knowledge (“stigmatized knowledge” (Barkum 2003), “pop-knowledge” (Birchall 2006)), to a certain extent a game with images of institutionalization and alternativeness which allows us to describe this culture along terms and concepts of Michel Foucault. The representation and wide-spread distribution of ideas and practices of NA as generally and widely accessible and at the same time elitist (“esoteric”) knowledge, holistically connecting moral and gnosiological topics, turns similar forms of collective imagination into an effective means to constitute a subject, and, at the same time, refigure powerful relationships. Although a number of authors have convincingly shown the prominent status of “the structure of belief” (Hanegraaff 1996: 1), as main characteristics of NA when it comes to the tradition of “Western esotericism” of the Modern Age (Hanegraaff 1996; Asprem 2012, 2014), it has become obvious that a number of key features of this culture have been tied to social developments typical for 20th century societies: The fundamental secularization and the formation of post-secular cultures, globalization, specific configurations and ideas of power, knowledge and subjectivity (Hammer 2001), together with the formation of consumer societies (Heelas 2008). An analysis of NA needs to adopt a stereoscopic perspective and also take various related contexts and cultural phenomena into account (for instance, conspiracy theories), analyses “traditional” religious cultures in terms of cognitive religious studies (the impact of counter-intuitive categories, the typology of interaction with full access agents, techniques of acquiring and distribution strategic information etc.). All these aspects allow speaking about NA not as a marginal social phenomenon or side-product of secularization and technological-scientific progress, but as one of the essential indicators and factors of global social developments at the end of 20th and early 21th centuries. As an epistemological model, as a form of meaning, mental constellations and as a means to shape new social networks and identities, NA gives access to the evaluation of fundamental processes taking place in contemporary cultures and societies.

Definition of task

The project focuses on the history and social dimensions of NA culture in the USSR of the 1960s–1980s, as well as in post-Soviet Russia. Even though NA culture in the late Soviet and post-Soviet countries should be analyzed in the context of global social and cultural trends, it seems important to respond to the question, which factors did exactly determine the genesis and the evolution of ideas and practices in the NA of the Soviet culture. At the same time, it seems extremely important to learn the role of culture in the context of NA social and ideological continuity between the late Soviet and post-Soviet eras, as well as social functions and ideas of NA practices in modern Russia.

In what way some specific configurations within socio-political and moral ideologies of the late Soviet Union did affect the formation of identities and public expectations of different NA

groups and their followers? How has the culture of the late Soviet NA been connected to the dissident movements and underground religious groups? To what extent did the evolution of NA ideas and practices of the late Soviet and post-Soviet culture relate to the features of nature scientific knowledge and technologies, as well as to the social image of science in general? How does the NA ideology connect to economic, demographic and ecological processes of the late Soviet and post-Soviet period? To what extent had the genesis and evolution of the NA in the USSR been defined through contacts between the Western countries and states of the Eastern bloc? Finally, it seems extremely important to learn the role of NA culture in the context of social and ideological continuity between the late Soviet and post-Soviet eras, as well as social functions and ideas of NA practices in modern Russia.

The research work within the project involves the analyses of the following issues:

- the genealogy of Soviet NA and the social construction of scientific knowledge in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev era;
- the features of NA in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia as well as in other countries of the Eastern bloc, interaction and mutual influence of NA culture in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, the USA, Western Europe, and South-Eastern Asia;
- the history of science and literature in late and post-Soviet Russia within the contexts of NA culture;
- the role of ideas and practices of social construction in the formation of NA culture in late Soviet Russia;
- the meaning of culture for the development of informal social networks and practices in late and post-Soviet Russia;
- the genealogy of para-scientific doctrines of the post-Soviet era (“alternative history”, crypto-linguistics, etc.) within the contexts of NA history;
- the role of NA ideas and practices in the formation of nationalist ideologies, conspiracy theories, and occultism in late and post-Soviet Russia.

Research methods

The proposed research project is interdisciplinary in its content and design. It will involve the use of a wide range of theories and methods within such disciplines as sociology and social philosophy (Michel Foucault’s ideas, the “Birmingham School” of cultural studies, sociological ideas and approaches by Pierre Bourdieu, Laurent Thévenot, Luc Boltanski, and Bruno Latour), social and historical anthropology (“history of everyday life”, “anthropology of emotions”), cognitive science of religion (Pascal Boyer, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, and Harvey Whitehouse), and gender studies. Chronologically, the project should cover the period from the second half of the 1950s to the 2010s. The individual research projects will focus on the various chronological frames within that period.

The project in whole and its separate sub-projects will be constantly coordinated by both the Russian and German research teams. We also plan to conduct diverse annual research seminars with the participation of the Russian and German research groups. In addition, the project aims to involve and create a broad international network of specialists in the history, sociology and social anthropology, religious studies, and literary criticism, engaged in research of the late Soviet and post-Soviet culture of NA. For that reason, the research teams plan to organize an international scientific conference on the project in 2020 in St. Petersburg. As a result of the project we plan to publish not less than twenty journal articles indexed in Scopus and the Web of Science citation databases as well as two collective monographs (in Russian and English). The project will certainly contribute to the new empirical knowledge about the Soviet and post-Soviet culture, as well as the global socio-ideological and cultural processes in the modern world, the elaboration of new methodologies in the study of modern mass culture and religious practices, and the development of interdisciplinary and international scientific cooperation in the field of Slavonic and Eurasian studies, sociology and anthropology of religion and history of everyday life as well.