

A Catholic Pyramid?

Locating the Pyramid of Merkinė within the Religious Landscape of Lithuania

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ABSTRACT: The pyramid of Merkinė, constructed by Povilas Žėkas in the southern part of Lithuania in 2002, began within the Lithuanian Roman Catholic milieu only to develop years later into an independent religious movement. In this article, I analyze the history and development of the pyramid in light of changes affecting religions in Lithuania during the last twenty-five years of religious liberty. I will examine the binding relationship of religion, nationalism, and resistance in Lithuania as the Pyramid of Merkinė became a place of spiritual pilgrimage, connecting the religious life of Communist and post-Communist Lithuanian society.

KEYWORDS: Pyramid of Merkinė, Roman Catholicism, spirituality milieu, Povilas Žėkas, Lithuania

The sociopolitical changes in Eastern and Central Europe beginning in the late 1980s following the demise of the Soviet Union touched all aspects of society. On the macro level, the implementation of religious freedom in many post-socialist countries ensured the right to believe in and practice one's faith both individually and in the public sphere. The religious revival that occurred in the decade after the dissolution of the Soviet Union increased religious practice and

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post-Communist identification with national churches.¹ In post-socialist societies, Soviet-enforced secularization was deconstructed in what sociologist of religion Titus Hjelm described as a “movement away from the secular—of public space and discourse.”² This desecularization process manifested itself through the emergence of religious diversity, re-establishment of minority religions, and establishment of new religious communities. Sociologist Eileen Barker has rightly observed the difficulties of coping with religious diversity within post-Communist societies, especially where the religious landscape is usually dominated by the national church.³ After the first ten years of religious revival, other social processes, more common to Western societies—religious privatization and individualization—could be observed in Eastern and Central Europe⁴ within the so-called New Age or “spirituality milieu” in former socialist societies.⁵ As such, the social and religious phenomena involving the Pyramid of Merkinė can serve as a case study for the religious privatization and individualization process in post-socialist Lithuania.

In 2002, the Pyramid of Merkinė⁶ was constructed in southern Lithuania by Povilas Žėkas and became part of the spirituality milieu.⁷ The story of the pyramid, which extends back to the 1990s, conforms to the pattern of religious resurgence and the relationship between religion and nationalism. The pyramid reveals developments in Lithuania’s religious landscape, including the shift away from religious revival toward the return of religion to the public sphere, then to the more privatized and individualized religion of everyday life. The Pyramid of Merkinė also illustrates changes in religious life in Lithuania, from the (traditional) religious to the spiritual—i.e., relocating authority from religious organizations to individual human beings.⁸

In what follows, I will discuss the origins of the social phenomena involving the Pyramid of Merkinė, analyze the teachings of its creator, consider the socio-historical context for the pyramid’s formation, and locate the movement within the regional context of the spirituality milieu. I argue that the Pyramid of Merkinė is a new religious phenomenon that illustrates the changes affecting religions in Lithuania and other post-socialist Eastern and Central European countries since the fall of the Iron Curtain.⁹

POVILAS ŽĖKAS AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW RELIGION

Povilas Žėkas (b. 1983) was an only child, raised in Alytus in southern Lithuania. He spent much of his childhood with his maternal grandmother on the homestead where the pyramid would be erected.¹⁰ According to Žėkas, his grandmother was a religious person who provided him with knowledge of Catholicism. On 19 August 1990, during Mass, the 7-year-old heard the voice of his guardian angel for the first

time, and that night he had a vision of a column of light coming from heaven and landing in the middle of a meadow on his grandmother's farm. The angel pronounced it to be a special place, which Žėkas later explained was due to the energy conveyed to it by the column of light. As a child, Žėkas became accustomed to these kinds of conversations with his guardian angel and did not feel afraid, even when, in later revelations, he was told that these communications were actually with God.¹¹

In her book, *When God Talks Back*, anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann has argued that “people learn to recognize God's voice through rules that are socially taught and collectively shared, but also in ways that are private, individual and unique.”¹² From his grandmother, the family's primary keeper of religious tradition, Žėkas learned to recognize God in his thoughts and to see God's existence around him. His closeness to his grandmother and her Catholicism made Žėkas' visions more real to their relatives, reducing their skepticism about the phenomenon's origin.

Žėkas' first vision occurred at a time when several important events were happening in Lithuania. The non-violent “Singing Revolution,”¹³ for instance, was part of the national awakening movements in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia (1987–1991). In Lithuania, which declared independence from the Soviet Union in March 1990, this national awakening involved religious revival. Roman Catholic churches were filled with people praying for their country, and Žėkas recalled being surrounded by people praying in church the first time he heard the voice of his guardian angel.¹⁴ In the atmosphere of religious revival, many people converted, returned to Catholicism, or started intensive Catholic and other religious practices. The numbers of believers, particularly Catholic believers, increased rapidly.¹⁵

These years also were marked by religious diversity. Many Lithuanians had not been taught Catholic doctrine due to Soviet restrictions on religion. Religious revival encouraged the public emergence of diverse religious beliefs, and one could meet people praying the rosaries even while holding esoteric beliefs and practices. Diversity also manifested itself through the emergence of new religions founded by locals as well as brought into Lithuania by missionaries.

The Lithuanian Catholic Church's role during the Soviet period led to the intertwining of religious revival with national awakening.¹⁶ Although religion had been removed from Soviet public life, Roman Catholicism in Lithuania had continued in people's private lives, helping many to deal with the Soviet reality. Catholicism enjoyed the re-emergence of public expression in the 1990s, but after a decade religion reverted back to again being a private matter, reopening the gap between public expression and individual practice. For some people, the Pyramid of Merkinė assisted in the bridging of this gap, offering religious experience based on belief, practice, and community—without institutional structure.



Photo 1. *Geodesic Dome of Merkinė. Courtesy of Milda Ališauskienė.*

As the twentieth century gave way to a new millennium, construction of the pyramid in 2002 would coincide with a decade of socio-political and economic transformations, including the country's engagement in international alliances such as NATO and the European Union. The Catholic Church participated in this public and political life, even while drawing boundaries to exclude those individuals and institutions that did not comply with Church teaching, including the Pyramid of Merkinė.

Seven years after the pyramid's construction, in the spring of 2009, Žėkas received a revelation that the pyramid should be covered by a glass geodesic dome, which prompted opposition from Lithuanian authorities, who said that such a building would be illegal according to laws regulating construction in the territories of national parks. Government opposition worked to consolidate followers within the Pyramid of Merkinė community, and several thousand visitor signatures were gathered to support the dome's construction. It was built later that year, and the group that helped in this effort would later be registered as a public association, officially establishing the community of Žėkas' followers. In June 2010, the association's website reported that people gathering inside the dome had, in accordance with the 2009 revelation, received the Holy Spirit.

After a series of court hearings, the judge decided the dome could stay and thus the conflict caused by the erection of the pyramid's glass geodesic dome was resolved for the moment. In 2012, an official road sign indicating the direction towards the pyramid was constructed on

the closest highway, thus legitimizing the pyramid as a place of cultural attraction and ending the legal fight for its existence.

In 2015, Žėkas completed the obligations spelled out in his visions with the opening of a small chapel dedicated to the guardian angel. The opening ceremony attracted not only several hundred followers but also the media, and the latter's depictions of the Pyramid of Merkinė and its founder, descriptions which had begun immediately following the pyramid's construction, should not be underestimated. Reporters covering the discourse surrounding the 2012 Phenomenon¹⁷—the expectation, according to a particular set of beliefs, that the world was to experience cataclysmic events on December 21 of that year—gave special attention to Žėkas' recommendations on how to survive the apocalypse. In turn, Žėkas used the media, including websites and social networks, to disseminate his ideas and doctrines, and provide information on the pyramid, including how to behave inside it. He insisted, though, that experiences within the pyramid differ according to the spiritual state of each person, hence visitors should act as they feel appropriate.

This history suggests that the construction of the pyramid and events surrounding it may be interpreted sociologically as the birth of a new religion, which according to the widely used definition, includes organizations characterized as both sect and cult types.¹⁸ The typical definition of a *sect* includes a group's relation to a larger religious group or tradition. In the case of the Pyramid of Merkinė, Žėkas' teachings and symbols employ traditional Roman Catholic words and phrases.¹⁹ He considered himself Catholic when he had his first visions, and he subsequently interpreted them within that tradition. The Lithuanian Catholic hierarchy, however, highlighted the discrepancies between Catholicism and the Pyramid of Merkinė spirituality. Standard definitions of a *cult* describe a loosely structured group, lacking in permanence, with a focus on a charismatic leader. From its inception, Pyramid of Merkinė spirituality and Povilas Žėkas' leadership have combined to propel the movement from a loose structure towards a legally established organization. Žėkas' charisma and the community's doctrine, practices and organization have allowed for the identification of Pyramid of Merkinė spirituality as a new religion. In what follows, I explore Žėkas' teachings and their recent developments.

ŽĖKAS' TEACHING

A 2004 book authored by Žėkas and his mother, Onutė Žėkienė,²⁰ is one of the primary written sources about his revelations, though his website offers other materials about his revelations and his answers to visitors' questions. The first part of the book contains his biography, written by his mother, presented within the framework of a standard

hagiography in the Christian tradition. It describes his life and various special events revealing his peculiarity or holiness. Žėkas' mother explains that he was recognized as a special child who was interested in the heavens, and she had to find a book on astronomy to answer his questions. His education was passed to his grandmother, who knew how to explain difficult matters to a child and introduced him to theology. These descriptions of his childhood are reminiscent of the biographies of other religious leaders.²¹ Hagiographical references to childhood emphasize and legitimize the person's uniqueness and importance, making the leader distinctive in the eyes of believers and thus contributing to the constructed charisma. By all accounts, Žėkas seems to fit these normative accounts.

The second part of the book is organized into questions and answers, with questions asked by Žėkas and answers given by God. His mother uses many common Christian words such as God the Father, God the Son, Trinity, angels, guardian angel, hell, and revelation, but her telling of creation is somewhat different from the two biblical versions in Genesis 1 and 2, and she describes the stages of revelation and the role played by the pyramid in saving humanity. Every section concludes with, "This is the word of God,"²² a declaration commonly used by Catholics after reading from the Bible during the liturgy. Such connections to Christianity are possibly a legitimizing strategy in a social environment dominated by Catholicism, but it is also true that Catholicism was predominant in Žėkas' family and social milieu. An important part of Catholicism is the Virgin Mary, considered to be very close to people, visiting them through apparitions during difficult times, particularly the Soviet period.²³ It should be noted that in his teaching Žėkas does not emphasize her as an important figure,²⁴ distinguishing his perception of Roman Catholicism from the one that is lived by common people in Lithuania.

It is difficult to systematize Žėkas' teachings, as he claims he is still receiving revelations from God. Following the typology of sociologist Roy Wallis, the Pyramid of Merkinė and its doctrine may be located between world-affirming and world-accommodating, in accordance with its "orientation to the world."²⁵ *World-affirming* religious movements emphasize human potential and offer techniques that enable people to reach their aims in life. At the Pyramid of Merkinė, visitors are invited to strengthen their spiritual health and thus help themselves in everyday life. While the practices themselves do not directly enable people to reach their goals, they might be considered as enabling people to cope with everyday stress and anxiety. *World-accommodating* religious movements provide inspiration for inner (spiritual) life, but they have limited implications for the way this life should be lived. Throughout its existence, the Pyramid of Merkinė has encouraged the interior life, and its loosely structured community and vague relations with visitors, including those who

possibly have had experiences within the pyramid, place it closer to Wallis' world-accommodating type of religious movement.

Two important aspects of Žėkas' theology are the location of God and the perception of the end times. He explains that God is inside each person, and everyone can obtain a relationship with Him. At the end of time, souls will travel to one entity—God—reconnecting every soul to the Spirit. The Spirit will join the Lord of the Solar System (the Lord Christ), who will join the Lord of the Galaxy, who in turn will join the God of the World (who communicates with Žėkas), who will reunite with the God of Universe, who in turn will join God the Father.²⁶

In 2011, Žėkas' dialogue with God was published on the Pyramid of Merkinė website, followed by a text on virtues and vices²⁷ with practical applications of teachings for everyday life. During his visions, Žėkas' questioned God about certain Christian virtues and vices, and the answers he received explained which behaviors should be considered sinful or would be touched by the working of karma. Some of the teachings encouraged sexual relationships within marriage, monogamy, and more social education on homosexuality, which does not inhibit spiritual growth. The essay condemns pedophilia as a sin and "societal illness,"²⁸ while incest, homicide, alcoholism, drugs and family violence should be fought against because they harm the soul. In general, Žėkas addresses sensitive issues also addressed by the Catholic Church, particularly with respect to sexuality and family life, although his approach is more moderate and does not emphasize celibacy, stressing that family life does not take away from spiritual development and there is no need for monasticism or clerical celibacy.

CONSTRUCTION OF A SACRED PLACE: THE PYRAMID AND GEODESIC DOME

During my research on the pyramid in early 2010, I met a woman who came with her husband and grandchildren, who seemed to enjoy playing in the open space around the pyramid and inside the dome. After several attempts to calm them down, the woman used a stronger voice. "You must be quiet; this is a sacred place." The children did not get the message, but her words led me to wonder how the sacredness of this space was constructed and when it became sacred. Construction appears to have resulted from continuous and varying interactions of visitors with the pyramid, including Žėkas and his family, and people's absorption of the family's narratives about the powers of the pyramid.

The symbol of a pyramid derives from ancient civilizations including Egypt, Peru, and Central America. Pyramids usually had two purposes—as a burial place and as an altar for worship.²⁹ Ancient pyramids usually were square-based, with triangular sides made of mud bricks and later of

stone. The Egyptian pyramids have attracted the most scholarly and religious attention, with attempts “to impose metaphysical and cosmological meaning upon the Great Pyramid.”³⁰ These attempts date back to the 1830s, when British mathematician John Taylor and Scottish astronomer Charles Piazza Smyth claimed that the Great Pyramid embodied divine revelation and prophecy.³¹ Later claims gave rise to pyramidology and attracted the attention of Christian millenarian movements. According to J. Gordon Melton, the prophecy of late-nineteenth-century Jehovah’s Witnesses framer Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916) about the Second Coming of Christ was actually grounded in the claims of pyramidologists. Currently, interest in the Great Pyramid is reflected in the teachings of Jessica Dao, leader of the Pyramid of Light movement based in Sydney. Dao teaches that a pyramid is “a symbol of ascension, a manifestation of heaven on the physical earth plane through Self-realization and God-realization for those souls who are seeking a higher consciousness.” The Great Pyramid “is believed to be an energy portal connecting the earth plane to Sirius where many souls and the Egyptian Gods reside. It is a connection of Heaven and Earth.”³²

Later pyramidology theorists developed the idea of extraterrestrial influence on pyramid construction, but the 1970s New Age movement took a fresh interest in pyramids with the idea of the “possible existence of an unknown energy concentration in pyramidal structures.”³³ Czech radio engineer Karl Drbal, for example, patented his invention of a pyramid that could sharpen razor blades. Alexander Golod³⁴ recently constructed a 144-foot-high pyramid near Moscow that is believed to have special powers to aid in healing, increase medicinal properties, and reduce radioactivity. Pyramids for individual use are widely sold on the Internet; the majority are constructed of metal,³⁵ though Golod constructed his from fiberglass.

While pyramids believed to have spiritual powers are frequently square-based—and in Žėkas’ vision God the Father told him that the pyramid in Lithuania was a divine place with the power to heal both spiritually and physically—³⁶ the Pyramid of Merkinė is triangle-based with triangular sides. It is constructed of aluminum, with two crosses made of a secret metal alloy according to information given to Žėkas during his revelations. (See Photo 2.) According to Žėkas’ mother, this revelation caused difficulty because it meant that contractors could not use more readily available metals for the alloy and had to follow the revealed measurements and the angle of pyramid placement. Special attention was given to the cross inside the pyramid because according to the revelation it was surrounded by special sounds from nature.

The sides of the pyramid are devoted to the three persons of the Trinity, and instructions in every corner explain what a visitor should feel in relation to each member of the Trinity at that spot. Close to the wall devoted to the Holy Spirit is a container with holy water supposed to

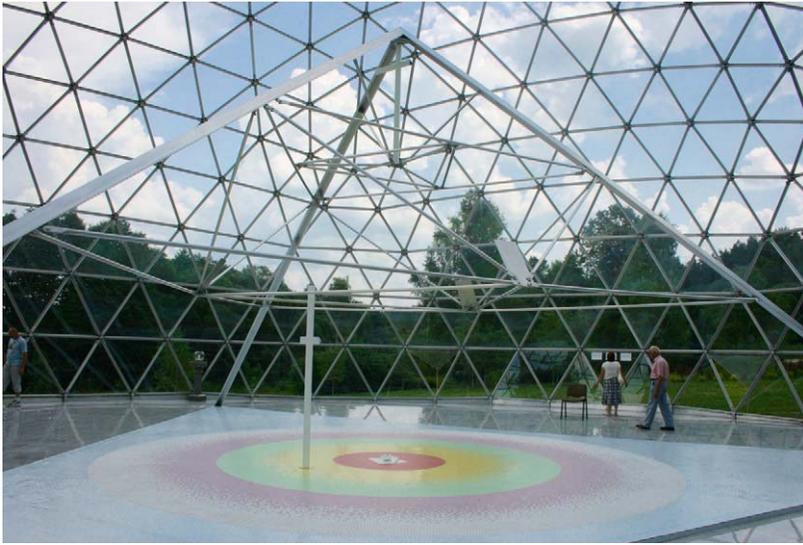


Photo 2. *The Pyramid of Merkinė. Courtesy of Milda Ališauskienė.*

heal certain illnesses. The flooring embraces three colored circles, with a heart represented in the center.

Inside, a visitor can easily get the impression of being in a Catholic shrine, and visitors I interviewed reported that the imagery prompted them to compare the pyramid with a Catholic place of worship. Juozas, a 71-year-old male, said he felt “a more direct relation to God, without any intermediary.” Neringa, a 42-year-old female who said the pyramid was associated with the Trinity, remarked that she felt “the same here as during the Eucharist in church.” Visitors are instructed to spend some time by the pyramid in the dome and later to enter it. “This order of presence in the pyramid helps to disclose its qualities and enables a person not only to visually look around but also to think, express personal intentions, ask God for help, and to feel spiritual exaltation.”³⁷

At the end of a large meadow behind the glass dome stand three carved wooden crosses representing the Trinity, with images of a dove (Holy Spirit), an eye (Holy Father), and a cross with a heart (Holy Son). These symbols are widely used in Catholicism in Lithuania.³⁸ (See Photo 3.) The crosses and pyramid are connected by a walking path through the meadow. On one side of the path, Žėkas built a hill to mark the place where energy first descended in the early 1990s; on the other side, he constructed a wooden arbor with a cross in it, naming it the Space of Gratitude. Behind the arbor stands an old cross commemorating the Soviet resistance. According to Žėkas, the arbor was built on the site of a hiding place during the first years of Soviet occupation. His grandfather’s two brothers were shot for their involvement in the resistance



Photo 3. *The Three Carved Wooden Crosses. Courtesy of Milda Ališauskienė.*

movement and later buried in the common grave in Merkinė. To commemorate lost relatives, the family placed a metal cross on the site, visible to everyone entering the arbor, which already has become a sacred place for visitors, who leave behind devotional artifacts—crosses, rosaries, pictures of Catholic saints. (See Photo 4.) This practice resonates with lived Catholicism in Lithuania, and Žėkas explained that the family could not control these spontaneous practices and did not want to interfere with them.³⁹

In 2015, Žėkas dedicated the final sacred place of the pyramid—a glass chapel with the figure of a guardian angel in the middle.⁴⁰ (See Photo 5.) It reminded Žėkas of his visions, and he dedicated it to all the guardian angels that in succession have protected the grounds. Outside, a wooden entrance gate reads: “You are beginning without end—I am eternity.” Žėkas said these gates should remind those who enter of their relationship with God, including those who may have forgotten and need practice to restore it.⁴¹

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING ŽĖKAS’ FOLLOWERS, CURIOUS VISITORS, AND TOURISTS

The Pyramid of Merkinė can be understood as a social construction of a new sacred tradition, associated with a particular place and based on interaction between Žėkas and visitors. As founder, Žėkas contributes to the construction of meaning through his writings and oral explanations.

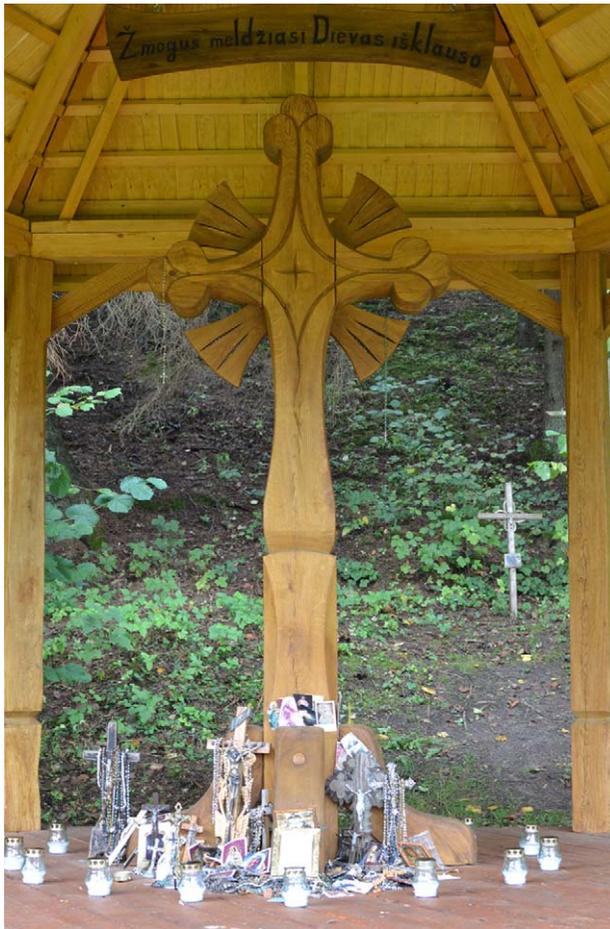


Photo 4. *The Cross with Devotional Artifacts.* Courtesy of Milda Ališauskienė.

This construction is dynamic, continuously changing with contemporary events and the individuals who come to the pyramid. Visitors contribute to this social construction through their participation and their innovation of new doctrines and practices, and they contribute to the sacredness of this place by talking to their families and friends, who later come to visit. As well, they provide material support, working to preserve and legitimize the place with such government assistance as road signs and the addition of the site to the list of places to visit in the country.

During the times I visited the pyramid, the majority of visitors were middle-aged or older Lithuanians, and families sometimes came with grandparents, parents, and children. There were usually ten to fifteen people wandering around, with three to five cars in the parking lot in addition to those belonging to the owners. In my interview with him in



Photo 5. *The Figure of the Guardian Angel. Courtesy of Milda Ališauskienė.*

2016, Žėkas stated that the number of visitors fluctuated with the seasons, attracting thousands during the summertime as opposed to the winter.⁴² Visitors are a highly diverse group of people—representing different social backgrounds in education, family status, and work—who are attracted for reasons ranging from a spiritual search and/or healing to mere recreation. I distinguished three particular types of visitors: Žėkas' followers, curious visitors, and tourists.⁴³

Žėkas' followers were the smallest group, well-acquainted with the place and the ideas of its founder, who return at least a few times per year. They knew the members of Žėkas' family quite well and usually had encountered the powers of the pyramid in some form. These followers surrounded Žėkas during hard times, for instance supporting him when the state accused him of illegally constructing the dome. He described

these people with the Lithuanian word *bičiuliai*—fellows.⁴⁴ They felt confident inside the pyramid and knew how to behave inside it without the instructions provided at the entrance. They had many stories about how the pyramid's powers had changed their lives or those of people they knew. They also were members of the virtual community of the Pyramid of Merkinė, communicating via the website and social media.

Curious visitors included those who came because they had heard about the pyramid from friends or family; some referred to media reports as their main source of information.⁴⁵ Many had heard of the pyramid's powers and wanted to test it for themselves. They came on their own or with families and friends, spending time at the pyramid and often visiting other spiritual places in the area.⁴⁶ They usually walked in small groups, reading the instructions carefully while sometimes appearing uncomfortable inside the pyramid, unsure how to behave. They sometimes watched and mimicked the behavior of other people. They used the pyramid yet did not relate to it personally or feel any sense of attachment. Their relationships to the pyramid were "characterized by largely instrumental purposes" that brought them "into association with other members."⁴⁷ The visitors I spoke with engaged in prayer or meditation, and in doing so were using the pyramid for instrumental purposes—whether for spiritual or physical healing, or something else.

Tourists—both national and international—usually came in buses journeying through the region of southern Lithuania called Dzūkija. Sometimes, they stopped to visit the pyramid on their way to the river Merkys that passes by a prominent place for canoeing. These groups had guides, and their behavior depended on their guides' stories. Some visitors were concerned about the pyramid's powers and worried whether the pyramid might be harmful; rather than go inside, they stood outside while their fellow travelers explored within.

Visitors and followers shared with me that their individual experiences within the pyramid had led them to further spiritual journeys and prompted them to return to the pyramid. These individual experiences, other surrounding narratives and constructions of the sacred place all seem to constitute a process of conversion, of becoming an adherent of the pyramid phenomenon. They seemed to follow the steps described by sociologists John Lofland and Rodney Stark.⁴⁸ According to the typical narrative, a follower had a problem that led them to search for an answer in religion; the Catholic Church either could not provide a sufficient solution or was not considered a relevant source of answers; and the follower came to the pyramid hoping to find help. For these followers, experiences within the pyramid helped rid them of their problems or at least reduce their tensions, encouraging them to return to the pyramid again and again.

The question of whether the pyramid of Merkinė phenomenon will evolve into a separate religious organization or continue as a spiritual

attraction makes it difficult to define membership or whether there is any conversion process to become a member. According to sociologist James A. Beckford, a religious group might attract certain types of members, such as a devotee or an adept. *The devotee* is characterized by high commitment to the group, full devotion to the group's values and teaching, and a feeling of material security within the group. These commitments reduce "the significance in their lives of bonds to people who are not fellow-members." I did not meet any visitors who might fit the devotee type, although close relatives of Žėkas might be partly attributed to this group. The *adept* member tempers a high degree of group involvement with life beyond the group. Most followers that I met related themselves to Žėkas and his ideas but showed no signs of disconnecting from their social context.⁴⁹

THE PYRAMID AND ITS BATTLEFIELDS

The history of the Pyramid of Merkinė above reveals several important points about Roman Catholic resistance against the Soviet regime in Lithuania. Resistance manifested itself through the continuation of lived religion in places forbidden by Soviet authorities, keeping symbols such as crosses and pictures of saints in the home, and listening to Vatican radio. During my research, I noticed a number of religious and national symbols inside Žėkas' residence—pictures of Jesus, Mary, and Pope Benedict XVI, and a Lithuanian flag standing in a corner along with several burning candles. (See photos 6 and 7). These symbols were quite common in many Lithuanian homes during the Soviet period, especially in rural areas where people listened to radio broadcasts from the United States and the Vatican. An examination of this resistance may be helpful in further analyzing the Pyramid of Merkinė.

Soviet authorities were antagonistic toward and took actions against the public display of religion, endeavoring to control the spaces of lived religion. One such place was the Hill of Crosses in northern Lithuania near the city of Šiauliai. Lithuanians tell stories of Soviet authorities destroying thousands of crosses on the hill, only for local people to rebuild them overnight. Visitors I interviewed at the pyramid brought up these stories when they discussed the legality of the glass dome covering the pyramid. One person asserted that if the authorities attempted to destroy the dome they would be cursed like the Communists who destroyed the crosses on the hill. In light of this history, the Pyramid of Merkinė can be understood as an evolving symbol echoing the resistance against the Soviet occupation of Lithuania. This understanding of the pyramid also suggests insights into the Lithuanian religious milieu.

In the religious landscape of contemporary Lithuania, the Pyramid of Merkinė has struggled to find its place and resist delegitimization. It did



Photo 6. *Altar in the Home of Žekas. Courtesy of Milda Ališauskienė.*



Photo 7. *Flag in the Home of Žekas. Courtesy of Milda Ališauskienė.*

not take long for the Catholic Church to respond to the pyramid phenomenon and the people attracted to it.⁵⁰ In 2003, the bishop of Kaišiadoriai wrote a letter to Catholic clergy and laypeople stating that the Pyramid of Merkinė was syncretistic and being used by New Age adherents worldwide; it had no links to Catholicism. Moreover, the bishop

wrote, attempts to invoke supernatural powers associated with the pyramid were a sin.⁵¹

This letter completed the rift between Povilas Žėkas and the Church of his youth. Žėkas explained to me that the bishop's letter was followed by constant criticism during sermons at his local Catholic church in Merkinė, prompting him to stop attending. Throughout my visits in 2010–2016, Žėkas' identification shifted from Roman Catholicism and concern for its situation in Lithuania to being an outsider to the Church. He emphasized that there were Catholic priests who visited the Pyramid of Merkinė and sometimes brought other people.⁵² As a consequence of Žėkas' evolution and the interest of priests, the pyramid has been turning into a location of resistance against the hierarchical authority of the Catholic Church.

Despite the bishop's criticism, Žėkas continues to assert that he continuously receives messages from the same God in which Catholics believe and that the majority of visitors to the Pyramid support him. Indeed, in 2010 he replaced a glass lotus flower in the central part of the pyramid with a carved wooden table with seven utensils, reminding visitors of communion utensils used in the Catholic Church. One may conclude that such a strategy helps visitors more easily connect the pyramid to their Roman Catholic identity because a majority of Lithuanians continue to declare adherence to the Catholic Church, though they may not practice this faith.⁵³

One of the turning points leading to the situation of the Pyramid of Merkinė within the Lithuanian religious landscape was Žėkas' public response to the 2012 Phenomenon. He warned that humanity desperately needed to change spiritual values and reject consumerism, inviting people to the pyramid to find spiritual power for such change and to take shelter from possible imminent turmoil and cataclysm.⁵⁴ He did not emphasize the end of the world, but his position within that discussion finally located him beyond the boundaries of Catholic orthodoxy. Žėkas used the 2012 Phenomenon, purportedly based on Mayan prophecies, to attract visitors to the Pyramid, but his ideas about the end of the world showed a complicated admixture of New Age ideas and Catholicism. While his ideas were based upon Western Esoteric traditions, he expressed them in terms familiar and attractive to people living in a Catholic environment.

It also is important to understand the role of science in Žėkas' efforts to legitimize the Pyramid of Merkinė religious movement. Benjamin E. Zeller argues that new religions engage with science in two ways, either "as a means of claiming legitimacy" or by challenging normative (Western) approaches to science.⁵⁵ According to historian of religions Mikael Rothstein, the contraposition of religion and science in the Christian milieu promoted the rise of science as the dominant system of meaning.⁵⁶ During the Soviet period, the official ideology of scientific

atheism, as well as Soviet modernization and forced secularization, conditioned the supremacy of scientific over religious explanations of phenomena in post-Communist societies.

In the beginning of my research in 2010, Žėkas attempted to use science as a legitimating authority to claim the certainty of the pyramid's sacredness.⁵⁷ His efforts at a scientific explanation have contributed to the discussion about religion and science in contemporary Lithuania, bringing insight into the process of secularization and the ways new religions engage with science. However, the latest developments within Žėkas's teaching shows that he is not emphasizing the scientific legitimization of the pyramid so much anymore, but instead emphasizing his spiritual experiences and revelations.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have discussed the pyramid of Merkinė, its socio-historical origins, and its place within the religious landscape of Lithuania. The analysis of this phenomenon discloses its inner complexity as well as developments and conflicts within the religious landscape in contemporary Lithuania. From a sociological perspective, the Pyramid of Merkinė demonstrates the process of religious individuation and the shift from reliance on outside religious authority towards inner spiritual authority. It also illustrates the process of religious diversification within the Roman Catholic culture in Lithuania, in which syncretistic beliefs and practices find adherents who continue to declare themselves Catholic.

The antagonism of both Church and State towards the Pyramid of Merkinė has turned it into a location of resistance against the authority of both institutions, reminding Lithuanians of religious and national resistance during the Soviet era and connecting Lithuanian religious life in the Communist and post-Communist periods. The Pyramid of Merkinė also has exposed the social constructions by which the Roman Catholic Church has regained authority in post-Soviet Lithuania.

The Pyramid of Merkinė has become one of the many local and regional places of contemporary spiritual pilgrimage, attracting people who consider themselves more spiritual than religious and prefer internal guidance over the external authority of organized religion.

ENDNOTES

¹ Irena Borowik, "The Religious Landscape of Central and Eastern Europe after Communism," in *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. James A. Beckford and N. J. Demerath III (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007),

654–69. For more on religious change in post-Communist societies, see Detlef Pollack, Olaf Müller and Gert Pickel, eds., *The Social Significance of Religion in the Enlarged Europe: Secularization, Individualization and Pluralization* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

² Titus Hjelm, “Is God Back? Reconsidering the New Visibility of Religion,” in *Is God Back? Reconsidering the New Visibility of Religion*, ed. Titus Hjelm (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 5.

³ Eileen Barker, “But Who’s Going to Win? National and Minority Religions in Post-Communist Society,” in *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irena Borowik and Grzegorz Babiński (Kraków: Nomos, 1997), 25–62.

⁴ Religious privatization, individualization, and return of religion to the public sphere in contemporary and particularly post-Communist societies have been discussed by many scholars. See José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); *Church-State Relations in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irena Borowik (Kraków: Nomos, 1999); Pollack, Müller and Pickel, *The Social Significance of Religion in the Enlarged Europe*, and Anna Grzymala-Busse, *Nations under God: How Churches use their Moral Authority to Influence Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁵ In this article, I refer to the “spirituality milieu” as encompassing the New Age movement and transcending the boundaries of diverse religious traditions and organized religion. For a broader discussion of the division between religiosity and spirituality, see Eileen Barker, “The Church Without and the God Within: Religiosity and/or Spirituality?” in *Religion and Patterns of Social Transformation*, ed. Dinka Marinović Jerolimov, Siniša Zrinščak and Irena Borowik (Zagreb: IDIZ, 2004), 23–47.

⁶ The name relates to the closest town, Merkinė, in southern Lithuania, although the structure is also called the Pyramid of Česukai, indicating its exact location in the Česukai village.

⁷ Followers of Povilas Žėkas refer to him as Povilas. In this text, I use his surname, Žėkas.

⁸ Barker, “The Church Without and the God Within.”

⁹ This article is based on participant-observation, text analysis, interviews with the pyramid’s founder, and visitor data from 2010–2016.

¹⁰ Although the pyramid was erected in a private area, it is open and free of charge to the public, maintained with financial help from Žėkas’ family and visitor donations. Žėkas has no official job.

¹¹ Interview with Povilas Žėkas, Merkinė, 6 January 2016.

¹² T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 66.

¹³ The “singing revolution” is a term used to describe the social movement of Lithuanians that started in 1988 and reached its peak on March 11, 1990 when the Independence of Lithuania from the Soviet Union was declared. The “singing revolution” manifested with gatherings of thousand of people in public places, singing national songs, and calling for freedom from the Soviet Union.

¹⁴ Interview with Povilas Žėkas, Merkinė, 6 January 2016.

¹⁵ Rūta Žiliukaitė, “Religinių vertybių kaita Lietuvoje 1990–1999 metais” [“The Change of Religious Values in Lithuania in 1990–1999”], in Arvydus Matulionis, ed., *Kultūrologija: Straipsnių rinkinys* [Cultural Studies: Collected Essays], vol. 6 (Vilnius: Gervė, 2000): 213–51; Rūta Žiliukaitė, “Lietuvos gyventojų religinė tapatybė ir socialinės-politinės vertybės: skirtumas tarp kartų” [“The Religious Identity of the Lithuanian Population and Its Socio-political Values: Differences among the Generations”], in *Dabartinės Lietuvos kultūros raidos tendencijos. Vertybiniai virsmai. Kolektyvinė monografija* [The Tendencies of the Development of Contemporary Lithuanian Culture: Cultural Transformations], ed. Rūta Žiliukaitė (Vilnius: Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno institutas, 2007), 49–69.

¹⁶ For more on the relationship between Roman Catholicism and nationalism, as well as the influence of this relationship on the place of the Catholic Church in the public life of post-Communist societies, see Grzymala-Busse, *Nations under God*. The Polish case she discusses has many resemblances to the Lithuanian case.

¹⁷ Robert K. Sitler, “The 2012 Phenomenon: New Age Appropriation of an Ancient Mayan Calendar,” *Nova Religio* 9, no. 3 (2006): 24–38; and Robert K. Sitler, “Update: The 2012 Phenomenon Comes of Age,” *Nova Religio* 16, no. 1 (2012): 61–87.

¹⁸ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (New York: Macmillan, 1931); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958); and Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963). Although some scholars have challenged the use of typology of religious organizations in the study of new religions, in the context of Lithuania and the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church in that country, this typology remains useful as an analytical tool for understanding the complex relationship among religious organizations.

¹⁹ Milda Ališauskienė and Massimo Introvigne, “Lithuanian Occulture and the Pyramid of Merkinė: Innovation or Continuity?” in *The Handbook of Nordic New Religions*, ed. James R. Lewis and Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 411–40.

²⁰ Onutė Žėkienė and Povilas Žėkas, *Žodis apžviečia pasaulį* [The Word that Enlightens the World] (Merkinė, Lithuania: n.p., 2004), 5–6.

²¹ Mikael Rothstein, “Hagiography and Text in the Aetherius Society: Aspects of the Social Construction of a Religious Leader,” in *New Religions in a Post-Modern World*, ed. Reender Kranenborg and Mikael Rothstein (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2003), 165–94; Milda Ališauskienė, “Some Aspects of Leadership in Neo-Hindu Religious Movement: The Case of Art of Living Foundation in Lithuania,” *Acta Orientalia Vilnensis* 11, no. 2 (2011): 49–62.

²² Translations of materials produced by Žėkas Povilas and his mother here and elsewhere are provided by the author.

²³ Rasa Baločkaitė, “Virgin Mary Apparitions in Soviet Lithuania: Low Profile Resistance and Practices of Faith,” a paper presented at the International Scientific Conference of Lithuanian Society for the Study of Religions, 23–24 October 2015.

²⁴ In the written sources of Žėkas' theology, I found Mary mentioned just a few times by his mother and visitors to the pyramid. Žėkas does, however, encourage the faithful to continue praying the "Hail Mary."

²⁵ Roy Wallis, *The Elementary Forms of New Religious Life* (London: Routledge, 1984), 9–39.

²⁶ Žėkienė and Žėkas, *Žodis apšviečias pasaulį*, 45–46.

²⁷ Povilas Žėkas, "Dvasinė informacija" ["Spiritual Information"] and "Nuodėmės ir dorybės" ["Sins and Virtues"], Merkinės Piramidė, at www.merkinespiramide.lt/skaitiniai; accessed 21 September 2016.

²⁸ Pedophilia cases had not been revealed in Lithuania when Žėkas was presenting material from his revelations; however, from 2009–2012 Lithuanian society was observing a case in which the father accused the mother of selling her daughter to pedophiles. Žėkas possibly reacted to this story in his commentaries.

²⁹ Paul Gendrop, "Pyramids," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), 7526.

³⁰ J. Gordon Melton, "Pyramids and Pyramidology," in *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, ed. J. Gordon Melton (Detroit: Gale, 2001), 1265–266.

³¹ Melton, "Pyramids and Pyramidology," 1265–266.

³² Jessica Dao, "The Pyramid of Light," at <http://www.thepyramidoflight.com/about>, accessed 20 September 2016.

³³ Jessica Dao, "The Pyramid of Light."

³⁴ See "In Harmony with the Surroundings," <http://www.pyramids.ru/english.html>, accessed 20 September 2016.

³⁵ See <http://www.copperpyramids.net> and <http://www.powerpyramids.com/>; both accessed 20 September 2016.

³⁶ Žėkienė and Žėkas, *Žodis apšviečias pasaulį*, 20, 23.

³⁷ "Lankytni objektai sodyboje" ["Places to Visit in the Homestead"], <http://www.merkinespiramide.lt/lankytni-objektai-sodyboje>, accessed 20 September 2016.

³⁸ The crosses were locally crafted in 2008.

³⁹ Email communication with Povilas Žėkas, 23 May 2016.

⁴⁰ "Istorija" ["History"], <http://www.merkinespiramide.lt/istorija>, accessed 20 September 2016.

⁴¹ Email communication with Povilas Žėkas, 23 May 2016.

⁴² Interview with Žėkas, Merkinė, 6 January 2016.

⁴³ The Pyramid of Merkinė is mentioned in the context of pilgrimage sites such as Gates of Dawn and Hill of Crosses on websites for foreign tourists. See for example "The Pyramid of Merkinė," <http://www.way2lithuania.com/en/travel-lithuania/pyramid-of-merkine>, accessed 20 September 2016.

⁴⁴ Interview with Žėkas, Merkinė, 6 January 2016.

⁴⁵ Some of these visitors said they had read about legal threats to the pyramid and its dome in newspapers and had come to show their support.

⁴⁶ A number of visitors indicated they were visiting different spiritual places the same day as the Pyramid of Merkinė, including the Full House Community in Panara and the Monastery of Liškiava.

⁴⁷ James A. Beckford, *Cult Controversies*, 83.

⁴⁸ John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (1965): 862–75.

⁴⁹ James A. Beckford, *Cult Controversies: The Societal Response to the New Religious Movements* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1985), 76–93, 82.

⁵⁰ In the history of religions in Lithuania, there is perhaps only one case where the Catholic Church embraced a new cult, which grew around a Marian apparition in 1608 in the town of Šiluva, which continues to be a pilgrimage site with visits by Church hierarchs and political leaders. Actually, though, there are more than thirty documented but unofficial Marian apparition sites in Lithuania, and some of them served as places of pilgrimage. See the Pilgrimai.lt website, <http://www.pilgrimai.lt/lietuvoje/>, accessed 16 November 2016 [defunct].

⁵¹ Elvyra Žežiženė, "Laiškas kunigams dėl Česukų piramidės" ["Letter to Priests regarding the Pyramid of Česukai"], *XXI amžius (21st Century)*, 34: 1138.

⁵² Interview with Žėkas, Merkinė, 6 January 2016.

⁵³ The 2011 Lithuanian national census data showed that 77.2 percent of the population reported belonging to the Roman Catholic Church. The 2012 survey, conducted by Vytautas Magnus University, showed about half the population believed in the main elements of Catholicism and one-third practiced their faith by praying and attending church regularly. See "Ethnicity, Native Tongue and Beliefs of Population: The Results of the 2011 Lithuanian population census" in Lithuanian, https://osp.stat.gov.lt/documents/10180/217110/Gyv_kalba_tikyba.pdf/1d9dac9a-3d45-4798-93f5-941fed00503f, accessed 20 September 2016.

⁵⁴ Inga Saukienė, "Diskusija apie pasaulio pabaigą: ką daryti, jei iš tiesų prasidėtų suirutė?" ["Discussion about the End of the World: What to Do if Upheaval Starts?], DELFI, posted 2 November 2012, <http://www.delfi.lt/mokslas/mokslas/diskusija-apie-pasaulio-pabaiga-ka-daryti-jei-is-tiesu-prasidetu-suirute.d?id=59899947>, accessed 24 September 2016.

⁵⁵ Benjamin E. Zeller, "New Religious Movements and Science," *Nova Religio* 14, no. 4 (2011): 4–10.

⁵⁶ Mikael Rothstein, *Belief Transformations: Some Aspects of the Relation between Science and Religion in Transcendental Meditation (TM) and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)* (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1996), 17.

⁵⁷ When I introduced my research to Povilas Žėkas in March 2010, he told me that the pyramid's powers would be tested scientifically in the near future and results provided to the public.