

Introduction: New Religions in Eastern Europe

New Forms, Recent Developments

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ABSTRACT: The introduction to this special issue on new religions in Eastern Europe provides a historical background on the place of new religious movements in the region during the Soviet and post-Soviet era. This includes the varieties of new and alternative religions active in these societies and how this changed after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The guest editor notes several main directions of scholarly research focusing on these new religions and summarizes the four articles included in this special issue, which focus on the Lithuanian neoshamanic community, the pyramid of Merkinė in Lithuania, marketing and branding strategies of contemporary spirituality movements in Estonia, and the Last Testament Church in Siberia, Russia.

KEYWORDS: Eastern Europe, Post-Soviet, post-communist

This special issue of *Nova Religio* presents articles written on the topic of “New Religions in Eastern Europe: New Forms, Recent Developments.” The religious movements and institutions of Eastern Europe¹ experienced difficulties on the societal, organizational, and individual levels of public life during the Communist period. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 brought significant social and religious changes to these societies. The first decade after the collapse of the

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Soviet Block, these social changes were characterized by the resurgence of public religious life and manifested through the reestablishment of the so-called traditional Christian religious communities that had remained active in the underground during Soviet times. The traditional religions—sometimes referred to as “historical religions”—are taken to be part of the historical and cultural heritage of these Eastern European countries and are usually privileged in the eyes of state and members of society.

Yet alternative religious groups that began emerging out of the Soviet-era religious underground also marked the resurgence of religious life in the post-communist societies. This includes, for instance, the Krishna Consciousness movement, which had been active in the region since the 1980s, but engaged the public only after the fall of the Wall. Diverse pre-Christian (Neo-Pagan) faith communities that survived the Soviet period also began to emerge from the religious underground after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Simultaneously, as Eileen Barker observed, leaders and promoters of new religious movements from outside the region had waited for and anticipated such social changes in Eastern Europe, and their missionaries were among the first foreigners who actually visited these newly open countries.² Beyond new religions introduced by such missionary work, local new religions originated as well. For instance, the movement known as the “White Brotherhood,” founded in 1990 in the Ukraine, was among the first of such local new religions in Eastern Europe. The group disappeared from the public eye after its failed 1993 Apocalyptic prophecies, accusations that its leaders intended to lead its members to suicide, and finally the imprisonment of its leaders, Maria Devi Khristos and Yuri Krivonogov.

However, religious life after the collapse of Soviet Union did not emerge from a vacuum. While the territory of Eastern Europe had been closed to the influence of Western religious ideas during the Soviet period, it nevertheless had been open to an influx of diverse religious ideas flowing in from various regions of the Soviet Union extending from the Pacific in the East to Central Asia in the South. This also included an active religious esoteric underground, even in Soviet times. After the opening of Eastern Europe, these various influences along with its European Christian and Jewish heritage became the background for the many diverse religious traditions that flourished in the territory of the former Soviet Union and bordering countries. Thus Eastern European countries with their Jewish-Christian heritage, the previous monopoly of scientific atheism, and the underground esoteric life became arenas of social experiment within the field of religion. How did the so-called alternative or new religions evolve in these societies after the fall of the Communism? Eileen Barker has argued that the fields of religion of post-communist societies were generally dominated by the national churches and other so-called “traditional” or “historic” religions and that new and alternative religions were positioned as

religious *others*.³ In other words, the presence of new and alternative religions indicated important boundaries in these societies.

Scholars from diverse academic disciplines approached the subject of new, alternative, and emergent religions in Eastern Europe. One might distinguish a few main directions of research focusing on these new religions. On the one hand, sociological and legal scholars analyzed questions of freedom of religion and the challenges of new pluralism after the collapse of the former Soviet Union.⁴ On the other hand, an array of other scholars have focused considerable amounts of scholarly interest in the new, emergent, and alternative religions of the region and within particular countries. This includes academic research and interest on ISKCON,⁵ the Unification Church,⁶ Hindu offshoot movements,⁷ and new Buddhist groups.⁸ Special scholarly attention has been paid to the emerging Neopagan religious groups centered on revivals of regional pre-Christian traditions,⁹ as well as various phenomena that are usually considered under the umbrella category of New Age or contemporary spirituality movements.¹⁰ All of these studies and research projects revealed the diversification processes underway in the societies of Eastern Europe affected by internal processes of liberalization, and the external social processes like globalization, migration, and modernization.

This special issue of *Nova Religio* approaches similar questions and themes and analyzes new forms and recent developments within the field of new religions in Eastern Europe. The issue contains four articles, focusing on Russia, Lithuania, and Estonia, whose authors are both experts on and natives of this region.

Anthropologist Eglė Aleknaitė analyzes the neoshamanic community in Lithuania, its relationship with other pagan religious communities, and religious traditions in general. She focuses on the narratives of Lithuanian shamans and related written sources. She concludes that the local social context wherein Lithuanian Pagan religion has developed emphasizes a nationalistic approach, which has led to its practitioners and even scholars disregarding academic and popular discourses of Neoshamanism. The author concludes that her research reveals the necessity of approaching the Neoshamanism phenomenon in Lithuania by considering its networking relations with other pagan traditions and subjective innovations added by the members.

Sociologist Milda Ališauskienė discusses the case of the pyramid of Merkinė as a new religion that emerged within the homogenous context of contemporary Lithuanian religion. Ališauskienė shows how the founder of the pyramid of Merkinė, Povilas Žėkas, situated it within the Lithuanian religious field. By using a sociohistorical approach, she discusses the emergence of the new religion, its sociohistorical context (a religious and national awakening), the main beliefs and practices of the group, its connections to the religious context of the country, and links to other religious engagements with pyramidal structures. She argues that the

pyramid of Merkinė has become a place of pilgrimage in contemporary Lithuania bridging the religious life of Soviet and post-Communist society.

Historian Ringo Ringvee also approaches the milieu of contemporary spirituality, but within another social context—one of the most secularized countries in Europe—Estonia. Ringvee discusses the diversity of this spirituality milieu, its public perception, and strategies of survival of groups within this milieu. After a thorough analysis of three cases of new religions in Estonia, the author concludes that such groups employ multiple different branding and marketing strategies in order to adjust to the neoliberal consumer society of Estonia.

Polish anthropologist Joanna Urbanczyk analyzes the new religion known as the Last Testament Church, established by the self-declared reincarnated Christ Vissarion in Siberia, Russia. The Last Testament Church has become a foremost symbol and representative of new religions in Russia because of both its local origins and popularity. She argues that before joining the movement, current members had sought alternative forms of spirituality in other groups, and wanted to improve the quality of their spiritual and more mundane lives. Urbanczyk emphasizes that for today's adherents of the movement, the collapse of the former Soviet Union has faded in importance as one of the marking points in these individuals' paths of their religious lives.

It is my hope that this special issue will contribute to the broader and deeper understanding of religious processes that occurred before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, will highlight the diversity of new religions and their social contexts, and will provide insights into the peculiarities of the teachings and practices of new religions that found ground for their activities in Eastern Europe.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In this special issue we use the term Eastern Europe very broadly, including all the countries within the territory or political sphere of the former Soviet Union. Articles in this volume focus in particular on Russia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

² 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*, eds. Irena Borowik and Grzegorz Babinski (Krakow: Nomos), 25–62.

³ Barker, "But Who's Going to Win?," 51.

⁴ For a further discussion on issues related to freedom of religion in postcommunist society and the challenges of "new pluralism," see: Eileen Barker, "But Who's Going to Win?," 25–62; James Richardson, "New Religions and Religious Freedom

in Eastern and Central Europe: A Sociological Analysis,” in *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irena Borowik and Grzegorz Babinski (Krakow: Nomos, 1997), 257–282; Tadeusz Doktor, “Churches, Sects and Invisible Religion in Central and Eastern Europe,” in *Religion and Patterns of Social Transformation*, eds. Dinka Marinović Jerolimov, Siniša Zrinščak, and Irena Borowik (Krakow: Nomos, 2004), 299–314; Ales Crnic and Katarzyna Zielinska, “Question of Religious Freedom and Tolerance – Slovenia and Poland Compared,” in *Challenges of Religious Plurality for Eastern and Central Europe*, eds. Miklos Tomka, Andrij Yurash (Lviv: ISORECEA, Ivan Franko National University, Geneva, 2006), 33–45; Peter Torok, “New Religious Movements in the Hungarian Census,” in *Challenges of Religious Plurality for Eastern and Central Europe*, 171–180; Dorota Hall and Rafal Smoczynski, eds., *New Religious Movements and Conflict in Selected Countries of Central Europe* (IFiS Publishers: Warsaw, 2010).

⁵ Istvan Kamaras, “Devotees of Krishna in Hungary,” in *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe*, 325–340; Przemyslaw S. Jażwinski, “The Development of ISKCON in Poland since the Mid-1970s,” in *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe*, 315–324; Rasa Pranskevičiūtė and Tadas Juras, “Acting in the Underground; Life as a Hare Krishna Devotee in the Soviet Republic of Lithuania,” *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe* 7, no. 1 (2014): 3–22.

⁶ Marta Libiszowska-Żoltkowska, “The Unification Church in Poland,” in *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe*, 341–348.

⁷ Tadeusz Doktor, “Hinduism in Poland,” in *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe*, 349–368.

⁸ Marika Laudere, “Introduction to Buddhism in Contemporary Lithuania: Groups and their Activity,” *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe* 6, no. 1 (2013): 21–32.

⁹ Piotr Wiench, “Neo-Paganism in Central Eastern European Countries,” in *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe*, 283–292; Rasa Pranskevičiūtė, “Modeling the Sacred in Nature among Nature-Based Spirituality Movements: the Case of Vissarionites, Anastasians and Romuvians,” in *Walking the Old Ways: Studies in Contemporary Paganism*, eds. Anna Anczyk and Halyna Grzymała-Moszczyńska (Katowice: Sacrum, 2012), 37–60; Kaarina Aitamurt and Scott Simpson, eds., *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (Durham: Acumen, 2015).

¹⁰ Milda Ališauskienė, “New Age in Lithuania: Development and Recent Tendencies,” in *Challenges of Religious Plurality for Eastern and Central Europe*, 192–200; Milda Ališauskienė, “Spirituality and Religiosity in the Art of Living Foundation in Lithuania and Denmark: Meanings, Contexts and Relationships,” in *Subcultures and New Religious Movements in Russia and East-Central Europe*, eds. George McKay, Christopher Williams, Michael Goddard, Neil Foxlee, and Egidija Ramanauskaite (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2009), 339–364; Milda Ališauskienė, “The New Age Milieu in Lithuania: Popular Catholicism or Religious Alternative?” in *Religious Diversity in Post-Soviet Society: Ethnographies of Catholic Hegemony and the New Pluralism in Lithuania* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 151–167; Rasa Pranskevičiūtė, “Anastasians in the Post-Soviet Region,” in *The Borders of Subculture: Resistance and the Mainstream*, eds. Alexander Dhoest, Steven Malliet, Jacques Haers, and Barbara Segaert (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 183–200.