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Pavel G. Nosachev

*HSE University; St. Tikhon's Orthodox University
20 Myasnitskaya str., Moscow, 101000, Russia*

23B Novokuznetskaya str., Moscow, 115184, Russia; Pavel_Nosachev@bk.ru

Possession in Contemporary Russian Orthodoxy: Between Ecclesiastical Religion and New Age

Abstract. The practice of exorcism came to Russia in the 17th century, when the Catholic rite was included in orthodox prayer books by metropolitan Peter Mogila. In the 18th and 19th centuries cases of exorcism were rare, for a time it was even banned by the state. Before the revolution the fashion on exorcism began, at the same time enlightened society held the view that possessed were ill with a nervous disease. In the new Russia the practice of exorcism was revived, it began with the simple priests;

later influential elders-exorcists appeared they attract thousands of people to the so-called “otchitka” (rituals of exorcism). Contemporary practice of otchitka has very little in common with pre-revolutionary Russian practices and even less in common with the classical cases of possession described in early Christian literature. The otchitka today is a kind of performance contained a number of patterns similar to modern exorcist practices of Catholicism and Protestantism. The transformation of exorcism practice under the influence of historical and cultural realities is an indicator of the transformation of Christianity itself, which absorbs external influences (political, religious, esoteric, cultural). Thus, this study is not anthropological or sociological, but use the frame of culture studies, its focuses on the ideas about the practice and ideology of exorcism, primarily formed in the circles of the Orthodox clergy, the theological elite that defines this discourse in modern Russia. This article aim is to demonstrate how exorcism in the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church correlates with the Russian New Age culture. The following questions are considered: How and why is its correlation with the Christian practice of exorcism possible? How was this practice formed in contemporary Russian Orthodoxy? How is it being implemented now and what New Age elements are present in it?

Key words: exorcism, Russian Orthodoxy, possession, New Age, Western esotericism, Christianity, USSR

Носачев П.Г.

*Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики»
Православный Свято-Тихоновский гуманитарный университет
101000, Россия, г. Москва, ул. Мясницкая, 20; 115184, Россия, г. Москва, ул. Новокузнецкая, 23Б
Pavel_Nosachev@bk.ru*

Одержимость в современном русском православии: между церковной религией и культурой Нью-эйдж

Аннотация. Практика экзорцизма пришла в Россию в XVII веке, когда католический обряд был включён в православные молитвенники митрополитом Петром Могилой. В XVIII и XIX веках экзорцизм был редкостью, какое-то время он был даже запрещён государством. До революции началась мода на экзорцизм, в то же время просвещённое общество придерживалось мнения, что одержимые больны нервным заболеванием. В новой России возродилась практика изгнания нечистой силы, она началась с простых священников; позже появились влиятельные старцы-экзорцисты, привлекающие тысячи людей на так называемые «отчитки» (ритуалы экзорцизма). Современная практика отчитки имеет очень мало общего с дореволюционной русской практикой и ещё меньше с классическими случаями одержимости, описанными в раннехристианской литературе. Отчитка сегодня – это своеобразный спектакль, содержащий ряд паттернов, схожих с современными экзорцистскими практиками католицизма и протестантизма. Трансформация практики экзорцизма под влиянием историко-культурных реалий является показателем трансформации самого христианства, которое впитывает внешние влияния (политические, религиозные, эзотерические, культурные). Таким образом, данное исследование не является антропологическим или социологическим, а использует рамки культурологических исследований, его внимание сосредоточено на представлениях о практике и идеологии экзорцизма, прежде всего сформировавшихся в кругах православного духовенства, богословской элиты, определяющей этот дискурс в современном мире. Россия. Цель данной статьи – показать, как экзорцизм в современной Русской православной церкви соотносится с русской культурой Нью-эйдж. Рассматриваются следующие вопросы:

как и почему возможна его корреляция с христианской практикой экзорцизма? Как формировалась эта практика в современном русском православии? Как она реализуется сейчас и какие элементы Нью-эйдж в ней присутствуют?

Ключевые слова: экзорцизм, русское православие, одержимость, Нью-эйдж, западный эзотеризм, христианство, СССР

Introduction

In his memoirs about the Soviet esoteric underground, Vladimir Widemann describes the story of how in the 1980s one of his underground friends invited him to an Orthodox exorcism ritual, which was performed on the regular basis in a remote church six hours away from Tallinn. Widemann colorfully describes the process he witnessed: “In total, about ten people raged, some quietly howling, some violently leaning back, foaming at the mouth, several times in a row. Those who were completely knocked out were taken to the refectory to drink tea, and then the otchitkas continued: with a censer, sprinkling, anointing, reading and singing canons, dialogues with demons and applying the demons to the holy cross and the holy gifts. Watching the audience, I noticed that, perhaps, most of the people who watched this ritual were St. Petersburg cyclodolers. They really got high in full growth-judging by their enthusiastic faces and bulging eyes with pupils in a nickel? Probably, they personally contemplated the ghouls flying under the ceiling, heard the esoteric whispers of dark angels framed by icon frames and were the only ones in the entire assembly who understood how Viy¹ in the vestments of a priest was cheating the audience ... ‘This is not so cool, ’said Eddie, ‘in the Pskov-Pechersk Lavra, at Father Adrian’s otchitka, at the same time, fifty people are raging-all night long, until the third roosters!’” [Wiedemann, 2020, 209]².

What is remarkable in this story is not the aesthetics of possession, which is traditional for any Christian exorcism, but the fact that the observers of the process were members of the Soviet esoteric underground who experimented with psychotropic substances and perceived the religious ritual as one form of esoteric experience³. Widemann himself, describing the specifics of the underground that surrounded him, repeatedly emphasizes that Orthodox spirituality, often in its most extreme forms, was an organic part of the theory and practice of the Soviet esoteric underground. The fact that members of this underground were attracted by the ritual of exorcism calls for a detailed analysis of this practice in order to relate it with the Russian New Age. What are the reasons for this...? This practice has been revived, rather ‘re-invented,’ both in the West (since 1970) and in Russia (since 1980) [Young, 2016; Giordan and Possamai, 2017], and in the process of this reinvention it has become a kind of bricolage construct that has absorbed, among other things, elements of western esotericism. Secondly, exorcism in Russian Orthodoxy is claimed to be rooted in an ancient tradition, but closer examination reveals a number of borrowings either from similar western practices (primarily the Protestant ministry of deliverance)⁴, or from esoteric spirituality.

This article plans to demonstrate how exorcism in the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church correlates with the Russian New Age culture. The following questions will be addressed: How and why is its correlation with the Christian practice of exorcism possible? How was this practice formed in contemporary Russian Orthodoxy? How is it being implemented now and what New Age elements are present in it?

Before proceeding to the answers to these questions, it is necessary to make several methodological clarifications. First of all, the historical context needs to be introduced, i.e. the situation which has developed in the Russian Orthodox Church from the early 1980s to 2020. This period is associated with a rapid religious revival, and at the same time, its beginning coincides with the spiritual search in the former Soviet occult underground. Many of its participant either attended Russian Orthodox Church or eventually became clerics and monastics⁵. The year 2020 marks the final point of this analysis for several reasons: not only did the pandemic restrictions affect the entire church life including the practice of exorcism, but at the 2020 Russia is losing two well-known Orthodox exorcists: Archimandrite German Chesnokov is dying, and abbot Sergius Romanov is being excommunicated from the church.

Since the term New Age is ambiguous, it is better to briefly clarify its use here. Further, in the article definition of New Age *sensu lato*, proposed by W. Hanegraaff [Hanegraaff, 1997] will be used. According to Hanegraaff, fusion that emerged in the Renaissance and underwent secularization in the 19th and 20th centuries, became the embryo of the New Age that developed after the 1970s. Thus, the New Age in a broad sense absorbs the entire spectrum of Western esotericism, modernized in the conditions of secularization.

In recent decades, possession and exorcism have been extensively studied by anthropologists and historians of religion, and researchers have examined it from various sides using a variety of methodologies. One of them the historian Brian Levack [Levack, 2013] proposed an approach that perceives of the phenomenon of possession in Christianity as a *performative act*. Both exorcism and the phenomenon of possession are acts of performance, in which all participants unconsciously play a role. Levack's theory is somewhat reminiscent of Hjalmar Sundén's role theory [Sundén, 1964], which suggests considering any mystical and religious experience as accepting role learned from the biblical text. Thus, Francis of Assisi and Anthony the Great had assumed the role of young men whom Christ in the gospels commanded to give up everything they had and follow Him. Levack proposes to consider possession as unknowingly following a certain script learned from culture. When applied to the Russian cultural context, the question is what has become a script for present-day Orthodox exorcism?

Before proceeding to the study, one more methodological remark should be made. The phenomenon of possession, as well as the practice of exorcism, is an integral feature of vernacular culture spread throughout the world; the history of these practices is well studied in anthropology. Thus, at its core, the ideas about *evil eye*, the attitude towards spirits and possession among modern Orthodox believers will in many ways be similar to the attitude of Muslims or Hindus to the same issues, but the theological interpretation of these phenomena will be different. Cultural conditions that shape not only the modern mythology of possession, but also the practice of exorcism will vary even more. It seems that not every ritual aimed at casting out alien entities can be called exorcism, *exorcism* is a Latin term suggesting a special ritual practice developed within Christianity. The transformation of this practice under the influence of historical and cultural realities is an indicator of the transformation of Christianity itself, which absorbs external influences (political, religious, esoteric, cultural). Thus, further study will not be anthropological or sociological, but use the frame of culture studies, its focus will be the ideas about the practice and ideology of exorcism, primarily formed in the circles of the Orthodox clergy, the theological elite that defines this discourse in modern Russia.

Exorcism and New Age

The idea of a connection between traditional Christian practice and the New Age culture may be perceived ambiguously, but thanks to a number of studies on the practice of exorcism in a historical and ideological way, it can be considered justified [McCloud, 2015; Young, 2018; Giordan and Possamai, 2020]. Originally formed as part of the preparation for baptism, the practice of exorcism in the Western Church has undergone a number of stages of transformation, the most interesting of which is the stage of its esoterization, which began at the end of the 19th century.

During this period, scientific discourse invaded the spiritual sphere, and the disputes around spiritualism prompted the emergence of scientific communities that aimed at studying issues related to the paranormal. The most famous and most recognized organization of this kind was the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). It created a sphere in which scientific achievements were organically combined with issues of a spiritual and supernatural nature⁶. According to E. Asprem, for the members of the Society, "the possible reality of spiritualism and other occult phenomena would not constitute a break with a naturalistic worldview, but rather indicate that our picture of the natural world had to be radically expanded" [Asprem, 2015, 267]. Thanks to the SPR a discourse emerged, within which the studies of life after death and of hidden abilities of the human psyche (the so-called Psi phenomenon) were given serious attention, and parapsychology arose as a new sphere of study. It was within this borderline discourse that the activity of Catholics and Protestants began to develop, striving to preserve the ideas of possession and exorcism in an age dominated by psychiatry and psychology. Thus, the fascination with spiritualism

in some Catholic circles quickly led to the emergence of ideas about the possession of the spirits of the dead and the connection of demons with specific houses and things from which a person can “get infected” with a demon. Curiously, in the same years, groups of so-called “Orthodox spiritualism” (for example, the “Moscow Spiritualist Circle”) were founded in Russia, considering spiritualism as a way to provide evidence for the existence of the spiritual world [Wagner, 2015; Razdyakonov, 2020].

Despite the fact that both the practice and ideology of spiritualism were condemned by the Roman Curia and the Orthodox Synod, these ideas entered the complex mythology of exorcism and possession⁷. In the first half of the 20th century, Pope Pius X sent the priest J. Godfrey Raupert, a former member of the SPR, who engaged in combining parapsychological research and Catholic theology, on a lecture tour to the USA. Raupert strongly opposed the practices of spiritualism and the fascination with tablets, since they would open the door to demonic forces. At the same time, he recognized the existence of superpowers that are not in any way connected with the spiritual world. For him, the only sign of demonic possession was if someone directly denied the holy sacraments and relics. In Raupert’s work, one can find clear traces of a new unity of esoteric and Catholic discourses and practices⁸. A similar process took place at the same time in the Anglican Church. Francis Young, the author of a number of works on the history of Christian exorcism, noted: “The ‘myth of the occult’ spun by demonologists is perpetuated indefinitely, and the thought-world of the exorcist becomes a closed system, supported by the testimony of alleged victims of occult involvement who, under continuous questioning from the exorcist, confess their entanglement with the occult and therefore legitimate the reality of demonic agency and the need for exorcism... Paranormal explanations are important to exorcists because they provide a crucial way of ‘explaining away’ claimed phenomena that might otherwise be interpreted as demonic, without the need to dig deeper for naturalistic or psychological explanations” [Young, 2018, 100]. The belief that any criticism of exorcism implied a hidden materialism led Christian theology to a claim that paranormal phenomena generated by modern esoteric mythology began to be perceived as real evidence of the spiritual world.

But the relationship between esotericism and exorcism is not only historically relevant. Giordan and Posamai have recently demonstrated ideological closeness of Christian exorcists and adherents of the contemporary New Age [Giordan and Possamai, 2020]. According to their research, the image of exorcism in contemporary Christianity includes a whole range of ideas, including the beliefs in possession by the spirits of the dead, in haunted houses, cursed objects, witchcraft, the ancestral sin, making genograms, paranormal phenomena, the idea that demons are beings external to a person who has no connection with his or her spiritual life and only interfere in special cases, and bring mental and physical illness rather than spiritual harm⁹. Contemporary Christian exorcists usually describe a victim as an initially good human being who, then, spoils the external contact with demons. Often this contact occurs not by fault of that person, but as a result of witchcraft or some kind of sin. Contemporary exorcism also evolves around the idea that the actions of the exorcist and his assistants are of crucial significance. At times, they consider themselves to be the only fighters against the forces of darkness.

Exorcism in Contemporary Orthodoxy

The term *exorcism*, which describes a ritual of casting out demons, has come into use in the Orthodox Church only in relatively recent times, only after the 1970s it became widely used, this happened due to the popularization of this practice in the Catholic church and in the third wave charismatic movement. The common and established Russian name of this ritual “*otchitka*” (*the prayers of exorcism*) stems from the verb “читать” (*to read prayers*) and implies to recite certain prayers upon the possessed person in order to free him or her from the demon. Exorcism as special institutionalized practice of Orthodoxy was brought to Russia in 1646 by Metropolitan Peter Mogila who translated the Catholic *Ritual Romanum* into Russian along with the rite of exorcism enshrined in it after the Council of Trent. Between the 17th and the 19th centuries, the prayers of exorcism were practiced rarely in Russia. The ritual of exorcism began to flourish only in the 19th century. In this era, there were many so-called *klikushas* or *ikotniks* [Worobec, 2003]. Many priests, both popular and not so much popular began to use the exorcism ritual to heal the

“klikushas”. At the same time, scientific studies on possession as a form of pathological disorder, approaching the phenomenon within the context of a newly emerging scientific psychology, appeared in Russia, most famously the works “Reading the Prayers of Exorcism over the Patients at the Present Time” by doctor of psychology Alexander Tokarsky [Tokarsky, 1904] and “Witcheries, Hysterics and Madness” by psychiatrist Nikolay Krainskiy [Krainskiy, 1900]. In the subsequent Soviet era, exorcism, like possession, became vernacular phenomenon, which existed in rural areas, but it is not considered seriously in scientific circles or among the learned Orthodox clergy. The church was not in a position to practice a rather exotic ritual, and all neuropsychic disorders were regarded as pathologies to be dealt with by psychiatrists. Only when the Soviet system started to collapse in the 1980s, interest in exorcism was revived. Many people considered themselves demon-possessed, respectively, many priests turned to the ritual of exorcism, the prayers of exorcism became fashionable¹⁰.

In the following, the practice of modern Orthodox exorcism will be introduced by means of some of its most illustrative examples¹¹. In contrast to Catholicism, in Russian Orthodoxy there is no rite or ministry of exorcists, not even a special blessing on the prayers of exorcism. Usually, the priests themselves begin to practice this rite with the permission of their bishops, sometimes even without it. Therefore, further the term ‘exorcist’ will be applied to any priest who positions himself as an exorcist or who was venerated as an exorcist by his followers. Among the most well-known examples, are Abbot German Chesnokov (1941–2020)¹², the oldest and most revered exorcist who conducts his rituals in the administrative center of the Russian church – the Lavra of St. Sergius near Moscow. Abbot Herman began to engage in exorcism in the early 1980s and immediately became famous throughout the country. For many years the term “*otchitka*” was associated primarily with him. Ex-abbot Sergius Romanov¹³ is not an exorcist in his main occupation, but a well-known spiritual leader who until recently ruled a monastery near Yekaterinburg. He became publicly known for his scandalous opposition to both church and state authorities. Among his “spirit children” are people of the highest echelons of power and illustrious media stars. In recent years, several clips were recorded, in which he acted as an exorcist, winning him wide acclaim in the social media. Hieromonk Vladimir Gusev, abbot of the church in the Oryol region, is probably the most famous media exorcist. His prayers of exorcism are now the most popular and commercially successful ones. One session with him costs about 80 euros. Journalists interview him and broadcast portraits programs about him. Less known but equally present as an exorcist in the media is Hieromonk Igor Sukhanov who also serves in the Oryol region. It is worth noting that all these priests are monks. In the Orthodox Church there are two types of clergy symbolized in the color of gowns: white is married and black is monks. In Orthodoxy there is a conviction that only people of a special spiritual life can engage in prayers of exorcism and such a life can be only for monks.

From a methodological point of view, it is better to divide further analysis into several integral parts: sermon, which precedes the ritual, the ritual itself, and its conductors, and consider each one of them in detail.

As for the *sermon*, any rite of exorcism is necessarily preceded by a long and often tedious sermon. It usually lasts about forty minutes, but in some cases can exceed an hour. The purpose of the sermon is to set up those who came to the future ritual, to explain its meaning, to introduce the basics of Christian life, to indicate the reasons for possession and the ways to get rid of it. Sermons almost always contain the following topics:

A conspiracy theory. The exorcist explains that demons enter people for a reason. It is a consequence of a worldwide conspiracy of evil forces against Russia and Orthodoxy. All clichés connected with the conspiracy of masons, world government, Dulles’ plan¹⁴, targeted corruption of the population, etc. are outplayed here. The demons, therefore, are the source of all geopolitical processes directed against Russia.

Satanism/occultism. The existence of demons is thought to be directly related to esoteric or occult practices. As in Western exorcism, the reason for the possession is often called a person’s fascination with fortune telling, horoscopes, participation in séances, interest in esoteric teachings, watching films with an occult plot, computer games. A common motive is the idea that a person can be infected with a demon through a false non-Christian spirituality.

Evil eye. In all centuries and in all cultures in popular beliefs, one of the main reasons for the possession was the *evil eye*. This topic is one of the dominant forms of explaining possession in Orthodox sermons. Depending on the priest, *evil eye* is either viewed as a self-sufficient source of possession, or it is tied to a person's low faith, since the belief in *evil eye* confirms the disbelief in the power of God, therefore, opens a person to demonic influence.

Ancestral sin. All the topics mentioned above are equally found both in the Orthodox and in the Catholic and Protestant discourses of exorcism. The idea of a renunciation of God or ancestral sin, however, is a unique Orthodox innovation. Exorcists claim that one of the main causes of possession in modern Russia is the October Revolution and the subsequent 70 years of atheism. By this logic, a nationwide denial of the tsar, the anointed of God, and therefore of God, occurred in the revolution. The communists were a satanic force, purposefully imposing atheism and anti-Christian values on Russia. Consequently, everyone who had some kind of involvement with communism (as a party member, a member of the Komsomol, the pioneers, or participated in events or, shared communist views) opened themselves up to demonic influence and let the devil into their soul. This demon has become an ancestral demon who now possessing every member of every family who were involved in communism until people repent for the sin of renunciation of God for themselves and their ancestors. These ideas were extremely popular in Russia in the early 1990s when many spoke of national repentance before God and the murdered tsar. And although these representations were supplanted from the official church discourse, they remained in the discourse of the exorcists having become one of its characteristic features.

Types of demons. Orthodox exorcism, just as in its western version, is not complete without listing the sins through which various types of demons enter a person. Moral aspects of the spiritual life here are intricately intertwined with various practices condemned in modern Orthodox circles, from watching television to unwedded marriage and abortion.

Now, how do the elements of the sermon relate to the necessary components of the ritual of Orthodox exorcism? In addition to a set of certain prayers and devotions, a necessary ingredient is the affusion of the possessed with Holy Water (water which was consecrated by the priest during the special ritual). And there should be a lot of water. Kettles, ladles, basins are used for it, of which the possessed are sprinkled and watered several times during the ritual. This is due to the belief that the demons are afraid of Holy Water and come out because of the affusion. The second no less common action is the venerating of a cross or other sacred objects (relics, icons), these objects should frighten the demon, make it obey the exorcist, interrogation of demons often takes place with the help of these objects. For Orthodox exorcism, the dialogue with a demon is less important than in Catholic or Protestant practice. The Orthodox exorcist does not need to recognize the name of the demon, he himself knows their names and often during the ritual states that "now the demons of corpulence come out and now the demon of lust, and now a computer demon". At the same time, the dialogue with demons is instructive, they may be asked why and how they entered, what their purpose is, who directs them. They can even be forced to tell instructive stories from the church life where saints defeat demons. In contrast to western exorcism, the role of prayers which is central to Catholic practice, is very much smoothed. F. Young describes official catholic rite of exorcism as follows: "The rite began with responses and deprecatory prayers before the first imperative exorcism, the *Praecipio tibi*, followed by a selection of New Testament readings: Jesus' commission to the disciples in Mark 16 ('In my name they will cast out demons'), the return of the seventy-two disciples in Luke 10, and Jesus' response to the accusation that he cast out devils by Beelzebub in Luke 11. Further deprecatory prayers followed before the second imperative exorcism, *Exorcizo te, immundissime spiritus*, and the ancient deprecatory exorcism *Deus conditor*, which included the signing of the demoniac's breast with the cross. The three-fold great adjurations followed, punctuated by the ancient prayer *Deus caeli*. The final adjuration constituted the climax of the rite..." [Young, 2016, 118–19].

Here great adjurations play the role of a unique prayer, after which the demon is obliged to live the possessed person. In the modern practice of the Catholic Church, it

is the presence of such prayers that makes routine church ritual an exorcism. In Russian Orthodoxy great adjurations has no central role, rather, the whole rite of exorcism perceived as a practice aimed at casting out demons. But it is worth noting that Western practices, and Russian Orthodox exorcism is not regarded as an automatic process, a demon can leave a person, or it can remain, then another ritual is needed.

Having considered the composition of the ritual, let dwell separately on the identity of the exorcist. Based on all the cases under consideration for this study, it can be concluded that the people conducting exorcist rituals are primarily actors. Such priests have a need for publicity, acting, play behavior which is easily guessed in the way they read prayers, what accents are made in the sermon, how picturesque their actions are performed during the ritual. Exorcism for them is a unique form of stage action where they can fully realize their potential. Most revealing in this respect is the activity of hieromonk Vladimir Gusev who in 2008 even created a rock band named “The Exorcist” performing in a heavy gothic style. The name of the group is a direct and conscious reference to the famous American blockbuster, it shows the role that Gusev assigns to himself in modern culture. Hieromonk became its soloist and leader and the group was supposed to promote the? of Orthodoxy and exorcism in Russia. Its symbol was chosen the letter *E* united with the Orthodox cross. But the clerical hierarchy did not like this idea, and Father Vladimir was forced to withdraw from the project. Nevertheless, the band was able to record one video clip which is the quintessence of the modern Orthodox ideology of exorcism. In the clip “Lenin Away from the Kremlin Walls”¹⁵, Vladimir Gusev stands in front of the Mausoleum and sings that communism, Leninism and Stalinism are forms of hidden Satanism. Lenin was labelled with the seal of Lucifer and introduced a satanic cult in Russia having zombified its population. At the same time, the clip itself outplays all forms of conspiracy mythology associated with secret societies and the occult that are common in religious circles, and at the same time uses classical aesthetics for metal – crosses, black clothes, dark entourage, hellish flames¹⁶.

The performative aesthetics of Orthodox exorcism has variations. Thus, the exorcisms of the Ex-abbot Sergius which have become known due to the media publicity differ in some parameters from those described earlier. Firstly, they do not have a commercial orientation, since only his flock, who has known him and is obedient to him for many years, participates in them. Secondly, the purpose of his exorcism is to demonstrate the truth of conspiracy ideas, possession is interpreted as a result of conquering the world government and the coming Antichrist. At the same time, the ritual itself is also as performative as possible and even prearranged. It is clearly seen on the records that the majority of those who are possessed simply play learned roles answering the questions of the priest in the way that benefits him.

Contemporary Orthodox Exorcism and Performative Theory

In his book “Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West” Levack emphasizes that all modern practices of exorcism do not and cannot use the script described in the gospels. Among the numerous reasons he names for this, two seem to be most relevant for the Russian context: Christ cannot be compared with any modern exorcist. The behavior of the possessed, the symptoms of the possession, and the process of casting out have nothing to do with the incidents described in the Gospels. Therefore, the source of the contemporary performative practice in Russia rests elsewhere. Neither can the source be found in the Catholic tradition, since for quite a long time, Catholic exorcism has been an act conducted by a specially appointed exorcist on a possessed who must have undergone a complicated bureaucratic procedure confirming his possession. In particular, it includes the attendance of a psychiatrist [Giordan and Possamai, 2017]. Catholic exorcism is, indeed, a performative act, since it is always done in front of a public audience. The priest’s assistants participate in the recital of prayers, hold down the possessed person, help with the ritual, and the family of the possessed person prays for him and watches over conducting the exorcism ritual. But however, this practice is not public. Contemporary Orthodox exorcism is more reminiscent of well-known cases of mass possession common in the Catholic Church in the 17th century, such as the famous Loudun Possessions [Certeau, 2000].

If we highlight the characteristic features of Orthodox exorcism, it becomes clear that this procedure always happens in public. It is set as a mass event, applying a

have unwittingly come to inhabit locations where the sins of past owners haunt the present... Thus, a site of murder, violence, domestic abuse, or occult activity becomes haunted by demons. The new human tenants find themselves in places of past sin and sorrow, locations where the violence and suffering that was repressed has disturbingly burst forth to torment them” [McCloud, 2015, 54].

This is where the practice of “Spiritual Housecleaning”, which is common among Protestants, arises. This discourse is a direct continuation of the ideas about haunted houses and the mechanisms of actions of spirits in late spiritualism [Davies, 2007].

In the ideology of Russian Orthodox exorcists, the theme of the contagion of places is transformed into the idea of the contagion of generic crime, which has distinct political connotations. The Russian tsar’s murder and the related sin of renunciation of the Orthodox faith, which occurred during the Revolution, is declared a form of corruption that had poisoned the entire Russian people and made each family susceptible to the influence of demons. Here, the spiritualist idea is reinterpreted in the context of ideas about national revival and the denial of the communist past, while preserving its conceptual core. Since all of communism in such rhetoric is considered a form of open Satanism, the spiritual language here easily becomes political and ideological. On the one hand, both apocalypticism and the theory of a global conspiracy have been deeply rooted in Russian Orthodox culture since the beginning of the 20th century, in particular, since the works of Sergey Nilus [Hagemester, 2018], on the other hand, the very formation of this discourse with Nilus was an expression of the esoteric environment surrounding him¹⁸.

In addition to the above-mentioned features inherent in the exorcist practice from the inside, it is worth noting the external social feature of its functioning. For Western exorcists, the practice of exorcising a demon becomes a form of getting rid of physical and mental discomfort, rather than getting rid of spiritual harm. Contemporary Russian Orthodox believers, going to *otchitka*, perceive this process in the same way. For example, in the Ryazan region, one of the pilgrimage services offers trips to *otchitkas*, which guarantee the removal of damage and ancestral curses, i.e. the return of physical and mental comfort. Largely due to the connection with business (tours for *otchitkas*, donations for an exorcism session, etc.), this practice is perceived as a commodity in a spiritual supermarket, which is characteristic of the consumer culture that has become a basis of the New Age.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let's return to the question at the beginning of this article: is there a direct connection between the Soviet esoteric underground and the revival of exorcism practices in Russian Orthodoxy?

The above-quoted memoirs of Widemann are only one of many examples to illustrate this. In the 1970s and 1980s, in the USSR has developed some kind of milieu which unite all spiritual seekers. The participants of this milieu shared a certain set of mythologies, ideologies, and ideas about religious practice, but due to the specifics of Russian culture and the peculiarities of the revival of spirituality – the connection with Russian philosophy, literature and pre-revolutionary aesthetics, focusing on pre-revolutionary writers, such as Dostoevsky, the existence of a real continuity in Russian Orthodoxy, – a significant part of the concepts formed in Russian Orthodoxy joined the elements common in the West, while they were perceived as equivalent to theosophical, spiritualistic, Sufi, and other elements.

Later, since the 1990s, in the process of separating different types of religious worldviews, the unity of the milieu was destroyed¹⁹, nevertheless, without ceasing to have a deep influence on the ideas and practices that developed from the beginning of 1980s. Exorcism just refers to such practices. The general outline and ritualism of exorcism preserves the traditions of the pre-revolutionary practice due to the liturgical books, but its ideological explanation is directly connected with the idea of spirituality that exists in the cultic milieu surrounding the practitioner. The practice of exorcism has become a curious mediator between esotericism and Russian Orthodoxy also due to the fact that its status in the church tradition, as well as the process of its development and formation, is far from unambiguous, because, like possession, exorcism is a cross-cultural phenomenon.

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¹“Viy” is a mystical story by N.V. Gogol, the title of the story is the name of a Slavic demon with whom the plot is connected. Here Wiedemann ironically compares the priest with folk demon.

²All further quotations from Wiedemann's book are a personal translation of the author of the article.

³Videman calls the participants of the esoteric underground, who experimented with psychotropic substances, namely with Soviet tablets “Cyclodol”, *cyclodolers*. Videman describes the effect of this tablets as follows: “Cyclodol (or ‘cycle’ for short) has an effect similar to diphenhydramine. The difference is that in the latter case, the tablets are smaller in size, and the effect is stronger... At one time there was entertainment in our company: to throw a cycle and go for a walk to the ancient cemetery of Alexander Nevsky, where mostly Orthodox people were buried... Immediately at the entrance, as soon as you pass the old stone arch with Orthodox bulbs, there is a black marble coffin on four balls, as if on wheels. God forbid you should have seen him under the cyclodol! It moved from its place, then rose like a silent helicopter into the air and, like a multi-ton stone projectile, began to fly over the graves. When the coffin hovered for a few moments, levitating, in the air, you could see a translucent female figure in a tunic sitting on it... The groans of the buried could be heard from the graves, as from the dungeons of Hades, witches were hiding in the thick bushes, flashing yellow eyes and gritting their teeth, marble and granite statues were filled with inner life, turning into messengers of otherworldly meanings” [Wiedemann, 2019, 102].

⁴About the third wave of charismatic Protestantism and the role that the ministry of deliverance plays in it see Sean McCloud's book [McCloud, 2015].

⁵In this regard, the composition of the late Yuzhinsky circle formed around Yevgeny Golovin is particularly indicative, some of whose members became priests and Orthodox laymen. This tendency is clearly shown in the memoirs of the participants of Yuzhinsky, the main part of which is available as materials for an unreleased film by Sergey Gerasimov: <https://paideuma.tv/course/svidetelstva-o-svidetele-neokonchen-nyy-film-sgerasimova> (accessed on September 9, 2021). Most interesting in this regard are memories of priest Konstantin Skrobotov, S. Semkin, V. Rynkevich and V. Shumov.

⁶For more information about the role of this society in the relationship between science and religion, see works of Shane McCorristine [McCorristine, 2010] and Egil Asprem [Asprem, 2014].

⁷About church condemnation of spiritualism see [Young, 2014].

⁸Raupert was a prolific author and wrote many books both on purely theological issues and of a polemical nature. The transformation of the understanding of exorcism is presented, in particular, in the work: [Raupert, 1919]. A similar position of combining esoteric and Catholic discourses at that time was occupied not only by Raupert, as an example, it is possible to mention Montague Summers.

⁹The most revealing from the point of view of the correlation of the New Age and the practice of exorcism is the study of the practices of exorcism in modern Montreal, when the views on exorcism of local Catholic Charismatics and the spiritualist New Ager group are compared. It is curious that, despite the difference in the composition of the groups and their opposite spiritual self-identification, their views turned out to be close in many respects. Both groups have ideas about the real presence of evil in the world, about its agents of influence (spiritualism, satanism, witchcraft, etc., the spiritualist group here fully shares the aversion to the occult, believing that it is a conductor of the truth spirituality), about possession not only by demons, but also by the spirits of deceased people, about the possibility of exorcising evil spirits from homes, about the need to use sacred artifacts in the process of exorcism and about possession through the influence of the generations. In the Catholic group, there is even a special ritual “Mass of the ancestors”: “A ritual called the ‘Mass of the Ancestors’ is oriented to liberating those present from the harmful effects of their forbears’ contacts with the occult. The ceremony severs the bond with these ancestors as well as the esoteric influences they have transmitted” [Meintel and Boucher, 2020, 119].

¹⁰A good example here is the novel by the Orthodox writer Alesya Nikolaeva “Invalid detstva”, in which its heroine, a woman from the Soviet intelligentsia, encounters a monastic community in which dramatic exorcism rituals take place [Nikolaeva, 2011].

¹¹The following text is a generalization of scattered evidence about modern otchitkas, both obtained as a result of the author's personal observations, and based on sources available on the Internet, recordings of sermons and rituals. First of all, among the sources: videos of ex-abbot Sergius Romanov are available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uCeUu9sXOc>; <https://ok.ru/video/1785185767863> (accessed on September 9, 2021); the film about abbot German Chesnokov's otchitka is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VA_K3kPFHqw, (accessed on September 9, 2021); videos of father Vladimir Gusev are available at: <https://ok.ru/video/2446091225830>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vM4yyoXpQRQ>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-CXzs59WjU>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zE5cB1leGk>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZ6ZROIQn5o>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxw7qDPvX-qY>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCmGjcGLxaY> (accessed on September 9, 2021); video of hi-

eromonk Igor Sukhanov is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnlYLigsKcI>, (accessed on September 9, 2021).

¹² His brief post-mortem bio is available at: <https://stsl.ru/lavra-news/otoshel-ko-gospodu-naselnik-troitse-sergievoy-lavry/> (accessed on September 9, 2021).

¹³ In the last two years, a political and religious scandal has erupted around Sergius Romanov, which involved both church hierarchy and the authorities. Due to a number of anti-government statements, violations of church discipline and denial of measures against COVID-19, he was excommunicated from the church and a criminal case was opened against him. For more information about him, see Eugene Clay article <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/resurgent-stalinism-and-a-renegade-monk-in-the-urals> (accessed on October 27, 2021). Romanov's story and its political connotations can be compared with the situation with shaman Gabyshev, who was also persecuted by the authorities for his anti-government activities (his goal was to expel demon from the Kremlin).

¹⁴ Dulles plan (План Даллеса) is the central document of conspiracy theory which was widespread in Russia from the late 80-s, according to which the CIA chief Allen Dulles had developed a plan to destroy the USSR during the Cold War by secretly corrupting the Russian culture and moral values of the Soviet nation.

¹⁵ This video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oog_sBu3bDI (accessed on September 9, 2021).

¹⁶ From point of view of culture studies, it is curious that here the aesthetics of metal born from the aestheticization of the image of Satan in Western esotericism and the counterculture of the 60s is borrowed by an Orthodox group whose goal is to fight against Satan.

¹⁷ For more information about conspiracy theory in contemporary American evangelicals see [Barkun 2006].

¹⁸ In general, the influence of the esoteric worldview on certain Orthodox circles of pre-revolutionary Russia is a separate and complex topic. For example, A.M. Pentkovsky proved that the extremely authoritative text in Russian and world Orthodoxy, "Candid Stories of a pilgrim to his Spiritual Father", dedicated to the rules of the practice of Jesus prayer, was written under the determining influence of Masonic esotericism [Pentkovsky, 2018].

¹⁹ This is clearly evidenced by the memories of the participants of Yuzhinsky. Thus, Konstantin Skrobotov, one of Golovin's close disciples who became an Orthodox priest, warmly recalls how during Ramadan he and his friends sat at night at a large table at Heydar Dzhemal's and ate lamb, and later, when the USSR collapsed, such warm relations became impossible precisely for religious reasons.

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