

IRINA SADOVINA

In Search of Vedic Wisdom:  
Forms of Alternative Spirituality in  
Contemporary Russia





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## LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

### Article I

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### Article III

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### Article IV

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## INTRODUCTION

Few things illustrate the dynamism and variety of contemporary alternative spirituality as well as online dating profiles. The genre usually limits users to a picture and a few statements to describe themselves. Such profiles often mention the user's spiritual affiliation: after all, it is an efficient shortcut to signaling one's values and lifestyle choices. Searching the Russian social networking website VK.com for the hashtag #VedaMan and its Russian equivalent #веды\_мужской, I used this very shortcut to get a glimpse of eligible bachelors who identify their values as "Vedic." Like all dating profiles, these were in equal parts intriguing and boring. But above all, they were varied. In the first five minutes, I encountered the profile of a long-haired follower of Slavic Native Faith, a cryptocurrency enthusiast, a Russian Orthodox believer, and a young Hindu man from India in search of a Russian wife who shares his spiritual standards. It turns out that while searching for a "Vedic" man does limit one's dating options somewhat, the term "Vedic" itself is much more capacious than it may seem. It opens up a world of possibilities.

I start this introduction with an excursion into Russian online dating because it perfectly reflects two key aspects of my research object: the heterogeneity of "Vedic" spirituality in contemporary Russia, and its apparent usefulness in people's projects of self-presentation and self-development. Vedic Wisdom forms a recognizable, if comparatively recent, tradition of alternative spirituality in Russia. In different sources, the term can refer to Indian religions, Slavic spirituality or the general idea of "traditional values," but in their self-presentation, people often enlist it in vague ways that feel appropriate to them. The very notion of Vedic Wisdom poses many questions. What does it mean to different audiences? How has the concept not only survived, but flourished in a social environment like contemporary Russia, which is notoriously unfriendly towards new or foreign forms of religious movements? Is Vedic Wisdom really that unusual? This fascinating, multivalent, contested and resilient concept opens up to all these questions and forms the focus of my research.

In this project, I have isolated "Vedic Wisdom"<sup>1</sup> as a central concept that holds value in different communities of alternative spirituality in post-Soviet Russia. Rather than seeking to define Vedic Wisdom precisely, I approach it as a discursive cluster which invokes a variety of projects, forming an idiosyncratic tradition within the Russian alternative spirituality milieu. This tradition draws on diverse sources, from the Bhagavad Gita to Western self-help. It draws into its orbit diverse individuals: spiritual seekers, environmentalists, casual readers of

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<sup>1</sup> I use quotation marks here to emphasize that by "Vedic Wisdom" I mean something quite specific – above all, specific to the context of the Russian alternative milieu. Quotations mark my object of study and signal that I do not engage other meanings the term "Vedic Wisdom" has in the Indian context or other contexts around the world. Elsewhere, for convenience's sake, I use the term without quotation marks, but they may be assumed. The one exception is Article 3, where quotation marks appear again for the sake of clarity.

popular psychology, as well as various critics, from government representatives to feminist activists. These actors engage in processes of negotiation, legitimation and other discursive practices which make and unmake the Vedic Wisdom tradition.

I chose to structure my study around the concept of “Vedic Wisdom,” rather than focusing on a specific movement, for two reasons. First, the concept is representative of the fluidity and internal variety of alternative spirituality. Second, the many meanings that the concept contains render visible the dynamics of contemporary Russian spiritual milieu and reveal the embeddedness of this milieu in broader cultural phenomena, both national and global. The studies that make up this project focus on discursive crossroads and moments of tension and negotiation, where multiple meanings of Vedic Wisdom become a problem or, alternatively, a generative resource.

The movements of alternative spirituality discussed in this dissertation have been subject to extensive research, both in global contexts and in the context of Russia: for example, Kaarina Aitamurto’s work on *Rodnoverie* (2011, 2016); Julia Andreeva and Rasa Pranskevičiūtė’s research on Anastasia followers (Andreeva 2012, 2017, 2018; Pranskevičiūtė 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015; Andreeva and Pranskevičiūtė 2010); Sergei Ivanenko’s work on Russian Vaishnavas (2008). Other studies, like those by Birgit Menzel (2012, 2013) and Alexander Panchenko (2004), zoom out from specific movements to map the landscape of alternative spirituality in late and post-Soviet Russia. In existing scholarship, the terms “Vedic” or “Vedism” are mentioned as they are used in the contexts of specific movements. However, to reflect the functioning of the over-determined signifier of Vedic Wisdom in the spirituality milieu of today’s Russia, it is necessary to focus on the shared space between movements. I aim to address this need by examining a cross-section of the Russian spiritual milieu and analyzing how Vedic Wisdom exists “in translation,” traversing boundaries between movements and reasserting them again. This approach helps shed light on broader tendencies in contemporary spirituality: global influences and hybridization of discourses, digitally mediated practices of the self and political aspects of spirituality.

To reflect the multiplicity of meanings that the term “Vedic Wisdom” evokes in the contemporary Russian context, the study relies on a mixed methodology, combining participant observation, in-depth interviews with several people, and digital ethnography conducted in Russia in 2012–2019. The aims of the project include explaining popular meanings of the term “Vedic Wisdom” and the particularities of its use: in other words, what it means and how it works.

To understand what Vedic Wisdom means, I must begin by acknowledging its multivalence. This internal heterogeneity is a cause for concern for some followers of Vedic Wisdom; for others, it is proof of its true and universal nature. When taken out of the context of immediate use, the concept can be confusing – for example, when I shared portions of this research at academic conferences, colleagues from India or scholars of Sanskrit were taken aback by the existence of not one but several Vedic Wisdoms in Russia. In this project, I aim to clarify

matters: to trace the lines, alternately rigid and blurred, between different movements and ideas that use the concept, and to show how the vernacular tradition of Vedic Wisdom has proliferated and transformed in the second decade of the new century, and in Russia's third post-Soviet decade. By analyzing the variety and fluidity of Vedic Wisdom in the alternative spirituality landscape of today's Russia, I seek to show both how it is understood, legitimized, contested and deployed by people who value it, and how Vedic Wisdom works in broader society in Russia and beyond. The broader objective that I pursue in the four publications that make up this project is to produce generalizable insights into the functioning of alternative spirituality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, both in Russia and in global contexts.

Understanding Vedic Wisdom as a vernacular belief tradition, I ground my research in the disciplinary concerns of folkloristics. To illuminate and analyze particular portions of this project, I also make extensive use of conceptual tools of religious studies (notably, scholarship on new spirituality and on legitimation of spiritual truth), media studies (internet memes and their political uses) and cultural theory (practices on the self and neoliberal culture).

In the first section of this introduction, I situate my study within scholarship on alternative spirituality, both in global and Russian contexts, discussing some key questions that animate the field. The following section describes my research design, including my questions, methodology and ethical considerations. The third section introduces my theoretical toolkit, which combines folkloristic approaches to theory, ethics, tradition, and vernacular belief with scholarship on legitimation, belonging and consumerism, issues that are pertinent to the study of alternative spirituality. In the fourth section, I present general findings and arguments, followed by summaries of my published articles on the subject. The discussion of my findings is organized around two perspectives on the discursive cluster of Vedic Wisdom: internal and external.

First, I describe the influential versions of Vedic Wisdom that emerge in neo-Hindu movements that have made their way into Russia in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, in communities of Slavic folklore-inspired spirituality as well as Slavic Native Faith, and in popular psychology. I then turn to the admittedly vague question of how Vedic Wisdom works. This thesis takes up only some of the question's possible dimensions. I focus on the "internal" functioning of the discursive cluster of Vedic Wisdom and study how Vedic Wisdom operates on the ground, at spiritual gatherings, in online communities, as well as in the lives, and in some cases livelihoods, of individuals who value it. Here, I describe the processes of legitimation and contestation of truth claims, as well as personal meaning-making of spiritual seekers.

Second, I focus on how Vedic Wisdom functions "externally," analyzing its place in Russian society and its implication in larger cultural logics. I begin by asking how alternative spirituality functions in today's Russia, given the legislative changes and a social climate that is not benevolent towards what is perceived as "nontraditional." To explain the ongoing presence and in some cases, tentative flourishing, of New Religious Movements such as ISKCON, I argue that many

spiritual ideas from the Russian cultic milieu persist in the form of popular psychology and self-help, which are more palatable to a wider audience. Finally, I ask whether Russian alternative spirituality is indeed unique, explaining that it is implicated in global developments that touch on many aspects of Russian culture, regardless of how “traditional” they are: digitally mediated communication and neoliberal practices of the self.

# 1. ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY

The object of my study is alternative spirituality in Russia; Vedic Wisdom is an aspect and manifestation of this broader phenomenon. But where Vedic Wisdom is an emic term, grounded not in one, but several concrete meanings that are actively used in communities I have studied, “alternative spirituality” as a term has much weaker ties to the emic world of the field. Rather, it is a terminological choice, the validity of which I will now clarify.

In the next sections, I will discuss the history and connotation of the term “spirituality.” Next, I will explain my choice of the term “alternative,” provide a brief history of alternative spirituality in the West, and discuss its main types. Finally, I will explain how contemporary alternative spirituality developed in Russia and highlight some key scholarly approaches to the study of this phenomenon.

## 1.1 Why “spirituality”?

The term “spirituality” is both emic and etic, and its meaning is always being negotiated in scholarly and other contexts. I see this dynamic nature of the term as an advantage: spirituality is not a clear category, but a problem and a site of cultural conversations about the meaning of life and the ways to live it. The term is valuable because it exceeds the terminology of “religion” (Wuthnow 2001, Woodhead 2010, Uibu 2016) and blurs the lines between religion and other realms of life (Uibu 2016: 15). To explain why I choose to describe “Vedic Wisdom” as a phenomenon of spirituality – and not, for example, as religion, faith, psychology or knowledge, I need to explain the term’s cultural history and the advantages that its connotations lend to my project.

Today, spirituality is a popular term in English, commonly understood as a search for meaning, a striving towards inner personal integration, and often, experiences and commitments outside of highly institutionalized contexts (Huss 2014: 49). There are many scholarly definitions of the term “spirituality” and attempts to distinguish its types and features. For example, Robert Wuthnow defines it as “a state of being related to a divine, supernatural, or transcendent order of reality or, alternatively, as a sense or awareness of a suprareality that goes beyond life as ordinarily experienced” (2001: 307). Paul Heelas distinguishes “expressive spirituality” from institutionalized religion as a mode that focuses on “that which lies ‘within’ rather than that which lies over-and-above the self or whatever the world might have to offer,” “which is integral to what it is to be truly oneself; which is integral to the natural order as a whole,” “which serves as the font of wisdom and judgement, rejecting authoritative sources emanating from some transcendent, tradition-articulated, source” (2000: 243). But while definitions, taxonomies and debates around the meaning of spirituality proliferate, it is important to recognize that spirituality is an emergent phenomenon that acquires

meaning in context (Huss 2014). Like religion and other related terms, spirituality is inflected differently, depending on when, where and by whom it is used (Steinberg and Coleman 2007: 6). I therefore approach it first as a phenomenon of cultural history, and only then as an analytic category.

Stemming from the Latin root *spiritus*, meaning “breath,” the term “spirituality” has been a central concept in Western Christian theology since the Middle Ages, defined in opposition to the material and the corporeal (Huss 2014: 48). In the course of the European colonial expansion, the notion of spirituality in its Christian sense was projected and sometimes imposed onto non-Western societies (Fitzgerald 2000, Asad 2003, Mandair 2009). But in the process, non-Christian societies also affected the West. New cross-cultural encounters brought with them a challenge of religious difference and sparked a fascination with the East as a source of spiritual insight, exemplified in Swami Vivekananda’s 1893 speech on Hindu Universalism at the Chicago World Parliament of Religions (Harris 2019: 179). By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of spirituality expanded beyond Christian theology to designate an individual connection with the universal realm of the spirit (Fuller 2001: 5, Carrette and King 2005: 39–41, Huss 2014: 49). Spirituality was still opposed to the material world, but it was beginning to split from the concept of religion.

New theoretical frameworks appeared to accommodate that split, with Émile Durkheim distinguishing between the mysterious realm of the sacred that was set apart from ordinary life and the religious system of beliefs and practices that aimed to make sense of that realm (1965). Even more radically, thinkers like Karl Marx and Max Weber denaturalized the social importance of religion and opened it up to being questioned (Marx 1970, Weber 1963). At the time, society was undergoing profound changes. As technological progress made rational solutions to life difficulties more appealing, people’s involvement in religious institutions seemed to be weakening (Furseth and Repstad 2006, McGuire 2008). These theoretical ideas and material factors gave rise to one of the defining theories of religious studies and social studies – secularization theory. The theory posited that the public role of religion – or rather, what has been understood as religion in the West – was declining as a result of modernization (Norris and Inglehart 2012).

However, the social changes that occurred in the twentieth century have been more ambivalent than what early secularization theorists predicted. Premodern material culture, along with the ideological landscapes associated with it, has indeed been losing ground, but the phenomena associated with religion have not disappeared. If anything, they got more interesting. New movements and ideas mushroomed all over the world, while older religious institutions continued to exercise political power.

Perceived as having failed to account for these complications, secularization theory came under severe criticism. Its notion that religion and modernization were inherently at odds was criticized by scholars of religion (Stark 1999, Stark

and Finke 2000) and cultural theorists (Derrida 2002: 65).<sup>2</sup> Some argued that “secularization” was simply a new stage in the ongoing development of religion (Hadden 1987) or a sign of religion’s transformation into “subjective-life spirituality” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005: 149). Within secularization theory itself, the early certainties about the impact of modernity on religion were replaced with discussions of likelihoods and probabilities (Wallis and Bruce 1992: 27, Norris and Inglehart 2012). Much more diverse than its critics often allow, the umbrella of secularization theory included different responses to key questions about what the decline of religion looked like, why it happened – whether for economic, social or cultural reasons, and whether it is reversible (Pollack 2015: 62).<sup>3</sup>

The debate around secularization has resulted in an important insight: even if modernity did not render religion redundant, it did transform its meaning. For the past decades, the boundaries between the secular and the religious have been negotiated by theorists, theologians, politicians, and other people in all walks of life (Asad 2003, Steinberg and Coleman 2007: 10, Kormina and Shtyrkov 2015: 9).

Following Boaz Huss, I identify the category of spirituality as the locus of this transformation (2014: 55). According to Huss, in the twentieth century, the notion of spirituality developed into “a new discursive construct – a novel cultural category which is used to classify and interpret human practices” (ibid. 52). Spirituality has challenged the dichotomy between the religious and the secular, and blurred boundaries between the two (ibid. 51). The emergent meaning of spirituality incorporated both body and spirit (Huss 2014: 50, Heelas and Woodhead 2005: 69). Common ideas associated with spirituality in current usage include the ideal of a personal journey of growth (Fuller 2001: 6) and a holistic worldview (Forman 2004: 48), pointing to a historical link between “spirituality” proper and alternative spirituality in particular, especially New Age culture (Huss 2014: 50).

Today, spirituality often stands in opposition to religion, leading a growing number of people in the West to identify as “spiritual but not religious” (ibid. 47). The phrase is understandable in Russian, though it functions mostly as a translation of the Western term.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the Russian concept of “spirituality” has its own complicated history, and its own layered relationship with religion and secularity.

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<sup>2</sup> See Pollack 2015 for a detailed discussion of contemporary critiques of secularization, which, he argues, often mistake the most popular and radical aspects of secularization theory for its essential features.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Bryan Wilson cites religion’s loss of influence on society at large, the decline of smaller communities and the rationalization of social life (Wilson 1982: 44). Steve Bruce focuses on rising egalitarianism and the role of individual choice, which weakened the usual mechanisms of reproduction of the religious institutions and ideas (2002). Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart say it’s because of existential security (Norris and Inglehart 2012).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, a 2019 article on the Russian-language lifestyle website BURO, entitled “Spiritual But Not Religious: What Millennials Believe,” which introduces the expression as having a U.S. American origin (Sokhranova and Binevskaya 2019).

In Russian, the rough equivalent of the word “spirituality” is *dukhovnost’*. Shaped by a different cultural history, *dukhovnost’* is distinct from the English “spirituality” and is sometimes translated as soulfulness (Aron 2012), or culture (Rousselet 2020: 39) to capture some additional connotations. However, *dukhovnost’* shares with the English term its etymological meaning (*dukh*, or spirit, is related to *dykhanie*, “to breathe”), a Christian history<sup>5</sup> and its contested nature. As in the West, the meaning of spirituality in Russia has broadened beyond the religious to include a variety of connotations. Today, the concept carries layers of connotations from the past and the present (Orekhanov and Kolkunova 2017, Rousselet 2020).

While it began as a Christian concept, today it refers to “a more generalized moral, aesthetic, or psychological depth” (Kornblatt 1999: 418). Kathy Rousselet describes it as “an amorphous concept, not entirely secular, and not entirely religious” (Rousselet 2020: 39, see also Kolkunova and Malevich 2014: 86). The most notable development, which distinguishes *dukhovnost’* from the Western spirituality, is its civic meaning. In imperial Russia, *dukhovnost’* was already used to conceptualize Russian nationhood and its difference from the materialist West; in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these connotations were repurposed by the Soviet government. But the meanings of spirituality proliferated beyond nation-building projects.

The Bolshevik government interpreted the Marxist theory of the natural decline of religion as a call to action. During certain periods in the country’s history, this meant dismantling religious institutions and promoting atheism. Yuri Slezkine suggests that this hostility was motivated by a concern about competition: with Bolshevik ideology as a new millenarian religion, there was no room for others (2017). Early Soviet policies took the shape of a fight against religion which by the beginning of the war often resulted in “explicit usurpation and reversal of religious norms” by the state, made obvious in the repurposing of churches into clubs and factories (Luehrmann 2016: 185). The Second World War marked a shift towards accommodation of religion, as the Russian Orthodox Church regained a role in the lives of citizens (Luehrmann 2016: 185, Rousselet 2020: 41). But if the Church’s role was limited, spirituality in the Soviet Union was far from being curtailed. Rather, its meaning was decisively detached from religion and multiplied.

Visions of humanity’s transformation, practices of the self and formulations of Socialist ethics were central to the Soviet project. Early on, prominent figures such as the First Soviet Commissar for Education Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875–1933) reconceived *dukhovnost’* as a feature of human development (Rousselet 2020: 41). Soviet individuals were encouraged to turn inward, self-interrogate and self-develop. Private diaries of the time reflect a desire to record one’s inner journey that was similar to the self-examination practices of the likes of Tolstoy (Kharkhordin 1999, Hellbeck 2006). Even in the midst of atheist campaigns, these

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<sup>5</sup> The Russian term’s Christian history has its specificities: see Pesmen 2000 for a discussion of the historical distinctions between the soul (*dusha*) and *dukh* (spirit) (2000: 15).

ideas and practices continued developing, forming a strong vision of non-religious spirituality, particular to the Soviet people.

After Joseph Stalin's death and Nikita Khrushchev's denouncement of the "cult of personality," there was a need to reinvigorate what it meant to be Socialist (Smolkin-Rothrock 2014: 178). One important strategy was to define its moral contents. In the course of two anti-religious campaigns, in 1954 and later in 1958–64, the state fought organized religion through restrictions on religious activity and scientific arguments against the religious worldview (ibid. 172). These campaigns were not entirely successful. Religious practices persisted, and in some cases the attendance and income of churches had grown (ibid. 185). Meanwhile, atheist lectures were not in high demand (ibid. 180). These failures encouraged debates within the apparatus itself about what secular society and atheism could look like (ibid. 175). It seemed clear that militant denunciations would not get atheism very far (ibid. 186). Soviet ideology needed to respond to people's needs that religion had filled.

By the late Soviet era, *dukhovnost'* became part of the civic life and national identity. Soviet *dukhovnost'* was understood as a special quality that was nurtured through education and culturedness of the population (Rousselet 2020: 42). Understood in this way, *dukhovnost'* distinguished the altruistic and well-informed Soviet citizens from materialistic Westerners. Meanwhile, the region's religious heritage was reintroduced into daily life as cultural artifacts. Orthodox churches and icons began to be celebrated as a national treasure: a subject of veneration, not religious but patriotic (Kormina and Shtyrkov 2015: 24).

This adoption of language of *dukhovnost'* by the state was far from the only process shaping its meaning. Like secularity in general, "Soviet secularity [was a] complex interaction of competing forces – modernization and scientific-technological revolution, religion and spiritual culture – all taking place in the mercurial political landscape of late socialism" (Smolkin-Rothrock 2014: 176). New meanings of spirituality were elaborated by intellectuals, in underground circles and in people's private lives. Many members of the intelligentsia supported the veneration of Russia's religious heritage as "sacred" culture; in particular, village prose writers such as Valentin Rasputin and Viktor Astafiev promoted *dukhovnost'* as an element of national character (Brudny 1998, Kormina and Shtyrkov 2015: 16). Writers like Vasily Aksionov and Bella Akhmadulina embraced "minimal religion" – a non-denominational idea of faith that was distinct from both religious institutions and state-promoted atheism (Epstein 1999: 378). Meanwhile, forms of esotericism and religious experimentation flourished in the underground and the private sphere (Menzel 2012).

These diverse forms of spirituality marked an expansion of what secular culture could look like (Taylor 2007: 371, Luehrmann 2016: 196). Inflected by Soviet cultural history, the changing meaning of spirituality blurred the boundaries of the secular and the religious. In a sense, it prepared the ground for the post-Soviet explosion of religious and spiritual practices.

In late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, Russia experienced both an intense spiritual effervescence and a fair share of related political dramas. Domestic and foreign

spiritual movements of all sorts flourished openly. Rather than a sign of the failure of Soviet propaganda, as it is often seen (e.g. Froese 2008: 165), this explosion could be interpreted as a new phase in the long process of transformation of the category of spirituality. Evidence in such continuity can be found in people's lives: many post-Soviet religious activists used the skills they had learned while promoting atheism in the Soviet context (Luehrmann 2011), and the atheist journal *Nauka i Religii*, which had published debates about religion and atheism in the Soviet era, smoothly transitioned to being a publication about religious life (Smolkin-Rothrock 2014: 196).

The post-Soviet transition was an urgent process of working out what the role of religion, spirituality, and secularity in society should be, what it can look like and what kinds of it are legitimate. It was not a utopian religious free-for-all, but rather a fraught period of experiments and debates conducted in a dense and unstable environment of an economic, social and political crisis. One of the participants in this activity of negotiation was the state itself, which has used the language of spirituality since the 1990s (Rousselet 2020: 44). In the following decades, as the Russian state sought to articulate a new ideological orientation, the sociopolitical meaning of *dukhovnost'* was reinvigorated (Østbø 2017, Rousselet 2020). It is most obvious in the language of traditional values and the prominent public role of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Today, the function of "spirituality" in Russia's nation-building discourses is just one of the term's diverse and changing meanings. In theological contexts, it marks a person's path to God; in general parlance, it refers a person's level of education and cultural competence (Kolkunova and Malevich 2014: 86). In this project, I use the term "spirituality" to point to these transformations and negotiations that occurred in Western and Russian cultural histories. I use the term to refer to a discursive realm that describes and facilitates a search for meaning in the contemporary conditions of blurred boundaries between the religious and the secular.

## 1.2 Why "alternative"?

The adjective "alternative" usually describes emergent or less institutionalized forms of spirituality (Hunt 2003, Stein 2000). "Alternative" is something that is opposed to the normal, the mainstream or the official. As Kristel Kivari puts it, it refers to "border knowledge that does not quite suit the frames of publicly accepted knowledge" (2018: 121). When speaking of Russian alternative spirituality, I refer to contemporary spirituality that incorporates New Age, New Religious Movements, as well as forms of Paganism and Neo-Paganism, and other non-mainstream spiritual practices. Additionally, I include popular psychology, because many teachings and practices of alternative spirituality, from yoga to Tarot, have successfully expanded beyond the realm of religion into the world of non-denominational self-help. My choice of the term "alternative spirituality" brings with it a set of problems, but also distinct advantages.

Let me begin by reviewing the main problems, of which there are three: the term is too broad, potentially hurtful to the ideas and communities it describes, and also too restrictive. The first problem with the category of alternative spirituality is its internal heterogeneity. Scholars in anthropology, folklore, ethnology, literary and cultural studies have tackled this problem by proposing taxonomies of alternative spirituality and definitions of its components. I mention some helpful distinctions in the following section, where I briefly introduce Western Esotericism, New Age, New Religious Movements and Paganism, and self-help. But such attempts at terminological clarity are tentative and limited, because contemporary spirituality in general is composed of diverse, often weakly institutionalized, practices and ideas. Movements and traditions change; so does their relationship to the wider world.

The second problem with the term is that the term “alternative” introduces not only distinction, but also a hierarchy. It implies that the realm in question is not mainstream or at least not the *main* phenomenon in a given environment. I recognize that the language of “alternative spirituality” suggests the existence of an accepted norm from which some cultural forms deviate. It is similar in this sense to the beleaguered term “folk religion,” which has been critiqued for naturalizing the opposition of “official” religion and “deviant” folk practices (Primiano 1995: 39). In the Russian context, the mainstream would be conceived of as the realm of “historical”<sup>6</sup> religions, led by the Russian Orthodox Church. Being identified as “alternative” in this context may be a disadvantage. It is worth noting that although scholars, participants and critics of alternative spirituality inflect the words differently, and for some practitioners, being “alternative” may be a matter of pride. Nevertheless, the potential for negative interpretations remains.

Finally, the third problem is that the term may be too restrictive. The boundary between the mainstream and the alternative is often blurred in everyday life, even if it may seem evident and even be reified in law and governmental rhetoric, as it is in Russia. The dating profiles I described above reveal more ambivalence on the ground: a Russian Orthodox man may be searching for a mate via a Vedic hashtag, a representative of the dominant religion in India – Hinduism – may be perceived as part of an “alternative” New Religious community in Russia. The term “alternative” obscures such nuances.

Nevertheless, I maintain that the term “alternative spirituality” works well for my purposes. To study something, you must be able to distinguish it from related phenomena, which is why definitions remain useful. I follow scholars like George Chryssides and Svetlana Dudarenok, who called for a pragmatic attitude to using the term New Age (Chryssides 2007: 13) and classifying New Religious Movements (Dudarenok 2004: 84). “Alternative spirituality” works well to do that work of distinction. And since all terms impose their limitations, it is useful to examine what this particular one enables. The advantages of the term “alternative

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<sup>6</sup> The current law regulating freedom of conscience and religion in Russia highlights “Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and other religions that are an integral part of the historical heritage of the peoples of Russia” (Federal Law No. 125).

spirituality” are threefold: it usefully implies marginality in a context where real marginalization exists; it includes the idea of novelty in a context where new spiritual practices have been developing; finally, it is capacious enough to describe Vedic Wisdom, which exists on the borders between New Age, New Religious Movements and popular psychology.<sup>7</sup>

First, the adjective “alternative” reflects my focus on forms of spirituality that are less established in the Russian context, have fewer adherents, and are frequently stigmatized in the larger society. My use of the term “alternative” echoes James Kapaló’s defense of “folk religion” as a term that is relevant in the context of post-Socialist Europe because it helps highlight the conflicted nature of the phenomenon it describes (2013: 5). Kapaló elaborates the term “folk religion” into the more specific concept of “folk religious field of practice,” which is “the product of attempts to regulate and mould [it] by a range of actors” (ibid. 5). Similarly, alternative spirituality can be understood as a contested field in which different actors seek to lay claim to the power to describe, evaluate and legitimate particular phenomena of contemporary spirituality.

The second reason to preserve the term “alternative” is that it points to the historical dynamics of which it has been part, invoking the wave of new, post-war forms of spirituality in Western and Russian culture. These connotations are even more obvious in concepts that actually include the word “new”: New Age, New Religious Movements or Neo-Paganism. But not all alternative spirituality is new, and in the case of many movements, the novelty is relative or rests in the eye of the beholder (Barker 2004: 99). For this reason, I prefer the term “alternative,” which allows me to signal that Vedic Wisdom in Russia is a product of a specific historical context, without identifying it unambiguously as “new.”

Finally, the term “alternative spirituality” is more capacious than other concepts used in this field. This capaciousness makes the term uniquely appropriate for describing Vedic Wisdom, a phenomenon that comprises New Age movements, religious communities, and spaces where they overlap with popular psychology or politics. In the next section, I will unpack some of the categories associated with alternative spirituality.

### **1.3 Brief history and main types of alternative spirituality**

Attempts at developing spiritual alternatives to mainstream religions or lifestyles have been made throughout human history. In academic study of alternative spirituality, its most direct roots are usually traced back to the occult groups and vernacular healing practices of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In European fin-de-siècle “centres of life,” such as the Mountain of Truth in Ascona, Switzerland, intellectuals gathered to liberate themselves from the oppressive grasp of urban civilization and resist the dominant course of

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<sup>7</sup> In Article 1, I advocated for the usefulness of the term New Age, alongside the complications it introduces, but for the purpose of the dissertation itself, a broader term is needed.

humanity's development (Green 2000). Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi's philosophies of radically egalitarian, environmentally sustainable life inspired intentional communities all over the world (ibid. 52). The Theosophical movement, led by Helena Blavatsky, a prolific Russian writer, proposed a vision of universal spirituality that drew on a variety of traditions and linked Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East, India, Russia and the United States (Tingay 2010: 38). In England, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was formed to pursue magical practices (Drury 2010: 720). After the Second World War, alternative spirituality in the West had a revival, manifested in European and American hippie movements (Chryssides 2007: 8), UFO interest groups, the resurgence of apocalyptic beliefs (Hanegraaff 2007: 27) and various New Age practices of healing and self-development, all of which profoundly shaped popular culture. Christopher Partridge describes the growing influence of these kinds of spirituality on the Western mainstream as "occulturation" (Partridge 2004).

These ideas were not universally accepted and often marginalized, culminating in the post-war era with the development of anti-cultism – a movement that believed new forms of religion and spirituality, especially New Religious Movements, to be dangerous and sought to curtail their activity. New religious movements, like all religious movements, can and do turn radical. Examples such as the Jonestown massacre, and stories of abuse that came out of ISKCON communities created understandable anxiety. Even scholars like James R. Lewis, who have actively spoken out against anti-cultism, acknowledge and grapple with the possibility of encountering anti-social attitudes or practices in the groups they research (Lewis 2003: 4). The anti-cultist anxiety was fueled by the media and projected onto all groups and ideas perceived as unusual. But alternative spirituality is very diverse, and any generalization about the position of such movements in society is bound to be inaccurate. Only a minority of new religious movements have historically posed legitimate dangers. The problem, rather, is that they are often exotic in the host culture and therefore destabilizing to the status quo. This makes them easy scapegoats onto whom fears of social change may be projected (Lewis 2003: 202).

Because of this diversity, alternative spirituality is difficult to analyze. Scholars often describe it as a loose network or even a general atmosphere where ideas and practices proliferate. Colin Campbell used the term "cultic milieu," defined as "all deviant belief systems and their associated practices" coexisting in the "cultural underground" (2002: 14). Paul Heelas suggests the more neutral term "holistic milieu" to describe the same environment of coexistence and mutual influence of different ideas and practices (Heelas et al. 2004). Others propose the image of a stronger network. On the emic side, Marilyn Ferguson defined the New Age as a Segmented Polycentric Integrated Network (SPIN) (Ferguson 1981: 216, 217). On the etic side, scholars describe the spiritual milieu as a "network" (Van Hove 1999; Possamai 2000, 2007), a web held together by "nodes" or "network hubs" (Corrywright 2007: 168, 177) or "junctures" (Chryssides 2007: 10). Campbell argued that such networks must either develop greater coherence and stronger leadership or dissipate (2002: 13). However, loose networks of

alternative spirituality do seem to proliferate with or without leaders, coherent structures, or even consistent membership. To explain what enables certain spiritual countercultures to work well despite weak institutionalization, Marko Uibu argues that alternative spirituality flourishes because it is not, in fact, all that alternative. Rather, it fits into cultural mainstream and relies on digital technologies, which enable movements to be quite resilient (2016: 43–44).

Separate bodies of scholarship have emerged to study particular segments of this milieu: Western Esotericism (Hanegraaff 1996, 2007, Versluis 2004, 2014, von Stuckrad 2005, Pasi 2009), New Age (Kyle 1995, Corrywright 2003, Partridge 2004, 2007, Possamai 2005, Chrystides 2007, Rothstein 2013, Robertson 2016, Hashimoto 2018), New Religious Movements (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, Beckford 1985, 1999, Dawson 1996, 2006, Barker 1995, 1999, 2004, Wessinger 2000, Bromley 2004, Urban 2015), Neo-Paganism (Luhmann 1989, Magliocco 1996, Harvey 1997, 2000, 2004, 2015, Pearson 2002, Rabinovitch and Lewis 2002, Strmiska 2005, Houseman 2016) or “self-spirituality” (Heelas 1988, 1996, 1999). In the next sections, I will briefly review these movements and ideas that make up alternative spirituality.

## **Western Esotericism**

Esotericism certainly carries with it the connotation of being alternative, not least because the term itself appeared in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to describe the idea of secret, non-Christian knowledge. But scholars of Western Esotericism show that its history is more complicated: ideas associated with esotericism have in fact profoundly shaped Western culture.<sup>8</sup> In 1964, Frances A. Yates made a radical but influential argument that scientific revolutions came out of the esoteric tradition of Hermeticism (Yates 2002). Recent studies also shed light on a dialogue between Esotericism and science (Hanegraaff 1996) and a continuity between Enlightenment ideas and 19<sup>th</sup> century Esoteric movements (Godwin 1994). Marco Pasi argued that Esoteric movements allowed people to experiment with new modes of being in the modernizing world, which often resulted in progressive and liberal ideas (2009).

Antoine Faivre, a founding scholar of the modern study of Esotericism, understood it as the practices of astrology, alchemy, magic, ideas that drew on Platonic and hermetic thought, and references to pre-Christian or ancient knowledge. Faivre’s significant contribution, however, had more to do with the structure, rather than the content, of Esoteric thought. He identified six features of esotericism, the first four being most important: 1. “Correspondences” – the assertion that things in the world are meaningfully interconnected; 2. “Living Nature” – the idea that nature is not material but also spiritual; 3. “Imagination and Mediations” – the use of imagination and specific techniques and tools to access the spiritual realm; 4. “Experience of Transmutation” – the emphasis on self-

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<sup>8</sup> See von Stuckrad 2005 for a thorough overview of scholarship on the subject.

transformation; 5. “Practice of Concordance” – the impulse to establish common ground between different teachings; 6. “Transmission” – the importance of getting knowledge through a line of initiated masters (Faivre 1994: 1–19).

However, as Kocku von Stuckrad points out, this typology is limited by the specific elements of Western history that Faivre took as his research objects. Von Stuckrad’s approach, by contrast, does not seek to describe, and thus limit, Esotericism as a teaching or a movement, but instead explores the esoteric as a discursive element that plays an important role in European history (2005: 9). The esoteric impulse may take many forms, but “the pivotal point of all esoteric traditions are claims to ‘real’ or absolute knowledge and the means of making this knowledge available” (ibid. 10). Today, the realm of the esoteric is associated with spiritual and religious movements that grew in the wake of the Second World War and the attendant crisis of values, followed by the development of counter-culture in Western countries in the 1960s (Clarke 1988: 149).

## **New Age**

Today, “New Age” is a widely recognized, if slightly outdated, term for a type of eclectic new spirituality that draws from different sources but promotes similar values, such as self-discovery and self-improvement, the unity of physical, spiritual and mental realities, ecology and the impending transformation of the world, often referred to as the Age of Aquarius (Chryssides 2007). The term “New Age” has been adopted in academia since the 1980s, when its use by practitioners already became less common (Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2013: 4). Although still popular, the term is routinely criticized for being “analytically elusive” (ibid. 5), neither emic nor etic, dated, vague, changeable, and overloaded with meanings (Chryssides 2007: 10–13, Hanegraaff 2007: 29). Indeed, the New Age is a “loose form of religiosity” (Hammer 2015: 372). It does not have fixed dogmas (Hense 2013) or even shared institutions. Still, there is enough consistency in the principles, ideas and even aesthetics of the New Age that it amounts to a fairly coherent milieu. As Marko Uibu writes, there is “much more normativity in the milieu than what transpires from the discourse” (2016: 55).

Scholars identify several features of New Age spirituality: a positive view of the self and a focus on self-improvement, eclecticism, a questioning attitude towards authority (Chryssides 2007: 22), as well as a critical countercultural stance, most notably expressed in the rejection of Western dualism, scientific reductionism and urban lifestyle (Hanegraaff 2007: 39). It promotes a reverence for nature that has “a strong sacralising bias,” emphasizing the unity of all beings and individual responsibility towards them (43). Many of these features have roots in the history of esoteric thought and practices. Von Stuckrad even argues that some New Age elements, such as channeling, deep ecology, New Age science, and the idea of the Sacred Self, should be understood as “modern esotericism” (2005: 141–146).

To sum up, definitions of the New Age often take the form of a field of associations. To make sense of it, Wouter Hanegraaff a useful distinction between “New Age” in a narrow sense, *sensu stricto*, and in a wider sense, *sensu lato*, was introduced by (1996). Understood narrowly, the term “New Age” refers to a millenarian vision, which predicts “imminent global upheaval preparatory to a golden age of abundance, prosperity and peace” (Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2013: 3). Understood more broadly, the New Age refers to various spiritual ideas about changing one’s lifestyle, all reliant on the positive view of the self that is central to the doctrine of “self-spirituality” (Heelas 1996: 2).

Though New Age spirituality includes diverse teachings and principles, the features discussed above help distinguish it from other religious paths that are part of the alternative spirituality milieu. The New Age generally excludes (neo)-shamanisms, wellbeing cultures, Paganism, and New Religious Movements (Harvey and Vincett 2012, Harrington 2007: 441). However, these types of spirituality, though usually studied separately from the New Age, are often perceived in the wider society as its aspects, or may sometimes appear in larger New Age contexts.

In Article 1, I describe such a situation: a festival of spirituality and holistic living brought together yogis, seekers looking to expand their spiritual arsenal, practicing Pagans, Vaishnava devotees and other participants, whose commitments to their spiritual paths varied greatly. Though not all of these people would identify as participants in New Age spirituality, all of them were interacting in a New Age setting. In my article I therefore defined New Age as a type of social situation and a mode of interaction between representatives of different belief systems, linked by certain concerns and ideas outlined above. Still, it is important to distinguish between New Age beliefs and alternative spirituality traditions that have defined boundaries and teachings: Pagan and New Religious Movements.

## **Paganism and New Religious Movements**

The umbrella term “Modern Paganism” refers to movements that seek to revive pre-Christian religious practices of Europe (Strmiska 2005). As such, Paganism is part of a larger tendency to turn to older, often local, religious traditions that preceded the advance of world religions. Because Pagan movements are tied to ethnic histories, they have variations in beliefs and practices. All of them share an explicit emphasis on a pre-Christian tradition (Strmiska 2005: 2). This attempt to recover ancient wisdom paradoxically marks these movements as distinctly contemporary. As Michael Strmiska explains, modern-day Pagans are not simply beginning to practice old traditions, but rather producing a new worldview out of remnants of past religious systems (2005: 10). This connotation of newness is explicit in the term “Neo-Pagan,” often used in scholarship but less favored by the practitioners themselves (ibid. 2).

Though Pagan movements emphasize the importance of following a specific ethnic tradition, and many have defined boundaries, in practice they are not as

distinct from each other as the idea of ethnic spiritualities suggests. Rather, there is often cross-pollination and change. In her study of the Russian Native Faith Rodnoverie, Kaarina Aitamurto discusses this murkiness of boundaries as a research difficulty: despite several common traits that Russia's Pagan communities share, it is hard to pin down its defining characteristics (2011: 9). One case that exemplifies this difficulty is the Ringing Cedars of Russia movement, which I discuss in Articles 2 and 4. While the movement's ecospiritual philosophy is not Pagan, it shares many elements with the Russian Rodnoverie milieu. At the same time, many of its ideas are common to New Age and its message is explicitly universal. In fact, many Pagan movements have some significant overlaps with the more eclectic parts of the alternative spirituality milieu: the basic logic of recovering hidden knowledge, as well as the emphasis on nature and the ecology.

If Pagan religious movements explicitly define themselves as a return to pre-Christian traditions, the term "New Religious Movements," or NRMs, unites a much more diverse set communities, ideas, traditions and spiritual practices. The one thing they have in common is that they are new, or at least perceived as such in their context.

Admitting the difficulty of defining these diverse movements with an umbrella term, Eileen Barker offers a helpful minimalist definition: New Religious Movements are "new" because they emerged after the Second World War, and "religious" because they take on the "ultimate questions that have traditionally been addressed by mainstream religions" (Barker 1999: 16). Barker suggests that most NRMs share common features: "the first-generation enthusiasms, the unambiguous clarity and certainty in the belief systems, the urgency of the message, the commitment of life-style, perhaps a charismatic leadership, and, possibly, strong Them/Us and/or Before/After distinction" (1999: 20). Barker's list is useful because it can help us categorize such phenomena. But it is also necessarily limited, since the features it mentions are more applicable only to some types of new religiosity, specifically those movements that are "world-rejecting," rather than "world-affirming" or "world-accommodating" (Wallis 2003).

World-rejecting movements exhibit hostility to the larger society and involve followers in an emotional conversion experience that leads to total submission of personal identity to the norms and goals of the community (Wallis 2003: 36–44). This scenario has been invoked by anti-cultist activists ringing the alarm about the dangers of new religiosity, first in the United States and then globally. Meanwhile, not all NRMs share this feature. World-affirming movements often operate as businesses, promising people worldly success through the use of special techniques (Wallis 1988: 162). Meanwhile, world-accommodating movements seek to help people connect with the spiritual realm while living their ordinary lives (Wallis 2003: 54). Wallis's classification has been influential not only for recognizing the variety of such movements, but also for tracking a particular movement's development. The International Society of Krishna Consciousness, for example, was classified by Wallis as a world-rejecting movement (2003: 36), but, as scholars like E. Burke Rochford point out, it has since moved towards a more world-accommodating stance (Rochford 2007: 201).

The recognition of such nuances, however, is not immediate or inevitable. In North America, Europe and Russia alike, NRMs have been notoriously controversial, often caught in the epicenter of satanic panics and public relations disasters (Beckford 1999: 105). In this context, religious studies scholars have had to get involved in public controversies and defend the spiritual practices they studied, as well as the people who adhered to them. Much NRM scholarship has focused on managing the reputation problems of its object of study (Lewis 2003: 215). Scholars have argued, for example, that many forms of New Religiosity are not anti-social but rather in tune with social change, and even provide ways to cope with it. Bryan Wilson argued that most NRMs align with “existing social facilities and structures, or the patterns of motivation which characterize capitalist society” (1999: 5–6), and James R. Lewis argues that NRMs can be seen as “a healthy – or at least a health-seeking – response to the dislocations and inequities of modern secular society” (Lewis 2003: 223). Similarly, Lawrence Lilliston and Gary Shepherd argue that NRMs equip their members with low-stress environments and ways to better deal with stressors (1999: 135). In response to such studies, anti-cultist activists have sought to ignore or delegitimize NRM scholarship as naïve (Lewis 2003: 160). This polemic has shaped NRM studies, and these movements have often been identified precisely by their controversial nature. In this context, the neutral term “New Religious Movement” not only serves to distinguish them as recent, it also counteracts their stigmatization as cults. But the defensive anti-anti-cultist stance may be too limiting as well.

Reflecting on the history of the field, David Feltmate has argued for shifting the center of gravity to NRMs themselves, rather than their critics (2016: 84). From the perspective of specific movements, things look different: for example, followers may perceive a particular teaching as old, rather than new. This means that scholarly models have limits. Indeed, Barker warns that “new” is a relative term (“When does a new religion stop being new?”) and advises against excessive generalization, arguing that the features scholars associate with these movements may or may not be present in a given case (2004: 99). Still, as with other imperfect theoretical frameworks that I discuss, the term “New Religious Movement,” as well as the lists of features and classificatory models that accompany it, remain useful reference points.

Pagan and New Religious Movements tend to have a greater degree of organization and even codification of spiritual ideas than other parts of the alternative spirituality milieu. In the next section, I will describe the culture of self-development and wellbeing, which is much less codified than these religious movements, but sometimes draws on their elements.

## **Self-Help**

Paul Heelas defined the New Age as the ethic of an autonomous spiritual Self. He noted how easily explicitly spiritual ideas transition into more pragmatic forms of applied popular psychology (Heelas 1999). This process is linked

with what has been described as the “age of psychology” (Havemann 1957) or “therapeutic turn” (Harvey and Vincett 2012) in Western culture: an interest in understanding, tending to and healing the self with the help of psychological insights and practices. This process began with Freudian psychoanalysis in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, received a new impulse after the Second World War, and eventually involved both sides of the Atlantic in a culture of psychologized self-care. As a result, this global “therapeutic ethos” extended far beyond the clinic and became an important aspect of Western popular culture (Illouz 2008). It also chronologically overlapped with the post-war wave of alternative spirituality. As a result, psychological and spiritual discourses often shared themes, practices and other elements.

Self-help is often studied as an American phenomenon, and for a good reason. In its current form, it was developed in 1950s and focused on traditional American values of rugged individualism and self-improvement (Dolby 2005). Self-help books teach their readers to take the matters of their mental health, relationships or financial lives into their own hands – or the hands of a support group (Archibald 2007). The American version of self-help has exerted much influence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the publishing industry and popular culture (Madsen 2014). But the logic of self-help has older precursors. In *The History of Sexuality Vol. 3: The Care of the Self*, Michel Foucault describes how the ancient Greek practice of the “care for oneself,” initially reserved for statesmen preparing themselves for participation in the public sphere, was extended to the population at large (1986). This new form of “cultivation of the self” for its own sake became profoundly influential and shaped all aspects of life, from personal relationships to scientific discourse (Foucault 1986: 44–45). As is often the case with Foucault’s work on ancient cultures, this model seems to describe the twentieth century, in which the pragmatic management ideal expanded from the workplace and the factory to encompass human life in general (Madsen 2014: 80).

Even though some New Religious Movements rely on a more pessimistic view of the self, seeing it as an illusion that must be transcended, the alternative spirituality milieu in general shares the basic assumption that one’s true self is basically good – it just needs work. The self must be rediscovered and maintained. This view of the self is central to both contemporary alternative spirituality and popular psychology.

### **Global alternative spirituality**

Arguably the most important material factor that shapes contemporary spirituality, alternative or otherwise, is globalization, and the attendant pluralization of religious options (Giordan 2014). Worldwide processes of cultural integration, mutual influence and diversification, aided by mass waves of migration around the globe, resulted in obvious and immediate experiences of cultural diversity, at least in some parts of the world. The cross-pollination of ideas has proven generative in the realm of religion and spirituality.

Although there have been a lot of studies in the field that focus on global contexts, a Western perspective remains particularly influential. As a result, Hugh Urban has argued in 2015 for approaching new religions as “arguably quintessentially “American” phenomena,” reflective of the American “values of free speech, freedom of religious expression, individualism, and an entrepreneurial spirit” (Urban 2015: 3–4). But treating alternative spirituality as a uniquely Western phenomenon or a Western export<sup>9</sup> is not sustainable; even a brief examination of similar phenomena worldwide challenges this assumption (see, for example, Clarke 2006, Zeller 2016). The concepts that are used to describe alternative spirituality are usually based in an Anglophone Western context. Moreover, many Western movements influenced the development of new forms of religiosity across the world. Still, this does not mean that alternative spirituality came from the West. New forms of spirituality – and resistance to them, for that matter – are a global phenomenon, and they take specific shape depending on the context (Beckford 1985, Shupe and Bromley 1994). My study of one particular context takes the global nature of alternative spirituality as a given and traces its development in a specific set of conditions.

## 1.4 Alternative spirituality in the Russian context

Russia’s imperial history left it with a great ethnic and religious diversity, which includes not only Russian Orthodox Christianity, but also Buddhism, Islam, pre-Christian traditional religions of indigenous peoples, historical Protestant denominations like the Lutherans and the Baptists, and the many recent arrivants on the region’s religious scene: newer Protestant movements from the West, Eastern and Eastern-inspired practices, and local spiritual innovations. This diversity makes for a dense cultural context, in which alternatives to mainstream forms of spirituality can flourish. Shaped by global processes of modernization, secularization and cross-cultural influence, as well as a specific history of *dukhovnost*, Russian alternative spirituality is neither a copy of its Western equivalent nor entirely unique. This provides fertile ground for research and comparative analysis.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Russia experienced “socio-demographic changes” that mirrored those that occurred in the West (Barker 1995, Shterin 2001: 314). The controversies around alternative spirituality in Russia are a result of the same challenges that have affected other societies: globalization, migration, the need to manage religious behavior of citizens in view of real or perceived threats. The country’s religious landscape has also been directly influenced by U.S. American spiritual movements imported with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the anti-cult discourse that emerged to combat them. However, the Russian context remains distinct. As discussed above, the process of secularization in Russia was inflected

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<sup>9</sup> For an argument in favor of seeing NRMs as a specifically American phenomenon, see Urban 2015.

by the Soviet experience, and the category of spirituality in Russian has specific connotations. At different times, the Soviet state supported religion, actively campaigned against it, and developed a new form of spirituality. Transition from the Soviet system opened up a space of unprecedented freedom for religious and spiritual experimentation. Vedic Wisdom emerged in this unique context.

In the Russian Empire, the realms of religion and the state overlapped (Luehrmann 2016: 181). Peter the Great brought the Russian Orthodox Church into the state system, replacing the Patriarchate with the Holy Synod. But even as Russian Orthodoxy was central to imperial identity, religious tolerance was also an important element in the state's self-presentation (Werth 2014). During Catherine the Great's rule, a system for dealing with religious minorities was introduced, which distinguished between "tolerated" and "persecuted" faiths; the former usually tied to ethnic identity, the latter identified as sects (Shterin 2001: 310). Russian peasant spirituality, formed of offshoots and idiosyncratic interpretations of the Church's teachings, is a notable example of sects (Etkind 1998, 2001, 2003; Panchenko 2002).

By the turn of the twentieth century, peasant spiritual movements extended their influence beyond traditional rural communities, becoming objects of fascination for urban intellectuals, decadents and even revolutionaries. Around the same time, Russia entered the process of modernization, which opened it up to global flows of spiritual creativity. A variety of meanings for *dukhovnost'* emerged in artistic and philosophical circles of the Russian Silver Age, from Nikolai Berdiaev's Christian existentialism to Nikolai Fedorov's cosmism (Rousselet 2020: 40). Visionaries like Helena Blavatsky and the Roerichs were important figures of fin-de-siècle esotericism with Russian origins and a global impact. Blavatsky and the Roerichs were instrumental in cementing the idea of India as Russia's spiritual cousin, sharing the same ancient homeland.<sup>10</sup> Beyond religiously inflected spirituality, Russian culture was developing its own modern tradition of the care of the self. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, intellectuals like Leo Tolstoy meticulously recorded their struggles towards perfection in written form, and advice literature flourished in both imperial and Soviet Russia (Kelly 2001).

During the Soviet era, spiritual life continued, even as the relationship between state and religion shifted several times. Despite the Bolsheviks' professed interest in the free-thinking spirit of the people, the state they built was hardly friendly to uncontrolled spiritual experimentation. But the Soviet project was itself experimental, and as such, gave rise to new forms of spirituality. I have discussed this process in detail in the section on *dukhovnost'*. As a part of these developments, alternative spirituality flourished in the Soviet Union, like it did in the West, after the Second World War (Menzel 2013: 269).

Despite the nature of the late Soviet ideology, secular in name and mostly atheist in practice, the late Soviet Union hosted a large private sphere and a

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<sup>10</sup> The work of the Roerich family to establish a special connection between Russia and India continues to be influential, to the extent that politicians from both countries have invoked Roerich's name for diplomatic reasons (Osterrieder 2012: 132–133).

complicated and thriving counterculture (Komaromi 2012). Within these independent or even rebellious spaces, a network of spiritual seekers formed an “occult underground” (Menzel 2013). It was extremely generative, full of interesting personalities and idiosyncratic spiritual paths carved out under restrictions and out of available material. Dissatisfied with the propaganda of rational skepticism and dismissive attitude to all religions, people turned for other perspectives to samizdat publications, underground initiatives (Honey 2006: 199), health practices, and various “imaginary elsewheres”: altered states of consciousness and dreams of alternatives, which “provided the means to drop out of Soviet daily reality” (Toomistu 2016: 47). The state’s suppression of metaphysics fueled diverse exploratory projects: a popular culture of *ezoterika*, experimental science, underground art, urban mythology, psychic and paranormal phenomena, and other forms of spirituality (Menzel 2012: 16, Panchenko 2004: 114). New religious influences appeared from abroad and from within. The International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), for example, arrived in Russia in the 1970s.

Such experimentations were not confined to underground. Whereas in the US New Age migrated from counterculture to popular culture, in the Soviet Union spiritual experimentation permeated different levels of society: intellectual, scientific, political (Menzel 2012: 13). Alternative spirituality flourished not only in spite of, but also facilitated by Soviet ideology and institutions. Soviet science was open to some forms of occult and esoterica ideas (Krasztev 2019). The state’s interest in “hidden human reserves” lent credence to yogic experiments (Menzel 2013: 254). Though folk beliefs in the supernatural were explicitly discouraged, Soviet scientists turned to dowsing in their free time (Kivari 2018: 114). Spiritual seekers were often members of *tekhnicheskaiia intelligentsia* with degrees in engineering or physics (Panchenko 2004: 114). As people propagated new ideas and practices, they did not simply reject official structures but negotiated them (Menzel 2012: 11). The private sphere allowed for many activities now associated with alternative spirituality. Pagan groups that appeared after the regime’s collapse did not spring from nowhere; in many cases, they built on the activity of folklore groups and cultural expressions of ethnicity that had been encouraged by Soviet scholars and politicians (Laruelle 2008: 286).

The post-Soviet transition was marked by an upsurge in new religious movements and New Age practices and ideas: foreign and domestic, reinvigorated and innovative. The 1990 Law on Freedom of Religions secured freedom of religion as a right, which was unprecedented in Russia (Shterin 2001: 312). Local movements and ideas came out of the cultic milieu (Ališauskienė 2017: 9). Shamanism and Buddhism flowed from the Pacific and Central Asia. Homegrown religious movements such as the White Brotherhood, the Last Testament Church of Vissarion, and the Bogorodichnyi Center appeared alongside the reinvigorated Russian Orthodox Church and other traditional organizations (Panchenko 2004: 114). The inflow of foreign influences and Western missionaries from Protestant denominations and other religious organizations further enlivened the country’s religious landscape. Charismatic personalities promoted unusual doctrines, esoteric teachings, and alternative health practices. Magic and nontraditional healing

services were widely advertised (Lindquist 2006: 23). Celebrity psychics appeared on TV (Honey 2006: 123). Both local and foreign organizations had an unprecedented freedom of activity to conduct missionary work in the streets and even grade schools. Mathijs Pelkmans argued that alternative forms of spirituality were more appealing to people at the time than the Russian Orthodox Church, because they posed future-oriented questions of truth and ethics rather than foregrounding rituals and traditions (Pelkmans 2009: 3).

Some of the emergent alternative movements tended towards chauvinist attitudes, reflecting common nationalist sentiments in a country hit by a severe socioeconomic crisis (Pilkington and Popov 2009: 300). On the other end of the spectrum, there was a renewed interest in personal empowerment. Popular psychology books, both original and translated from English, became bestsellers. A subculture of holistic living, overlapping with Slavic Native spirituality and back-to-the-land efforts, flourished (Aitamurto 2016, Andreeva 2017). Different kinds of astrology, Western and Eastern, and other systems for interpreting personality traits, proliferate. The industry of self-help, which often thrives in periods of economic insecurity (McGee 2005), provided people with the much-needed promise of empowerment in a time of extreme hardship during the post-Soviet crisis. But while the post-Soviet spiritual diversity provided many seekers with ideas and communities, and allowed different projects to flourish, this effervescence also introduced threats to social stability, both real and imagined.

Religious liberation and spiritual experimentation occurred in Russia alongside a deep social, economic and political crisis. In an already fraught environment, the Russian public began to learn about the problems that some of the recently arrived movements, from Aum Shinrikyo (Shterin 2001: 315) to ISKCON (Rochford 2007: 3), have had in other countries. At the same time, domestic scandals erupted around controversial groups like the Great White Brotherhood, led by Marina Tsvigun (Maria Devi Christos) and accused by the media of planning a mass suicide (Borenstein 1995). With so many new forms of spirituality, it was fair to assume that the development of these groups would be unpredictable. The radically open legislation was not equipped to deal with the resultant uncertainty. The situation was ripe for a satanic panic, and radical religious freedom was soon restricted.

Initially, movements received pressure from below, through the emergent anti-cult movement. In Russia, this movement was initially based on Western models (specifically US American evangelical discourse), though it later deployed anti-Western sentiment in its rhetoric. The movement was developed and promoted by Alexander Dvorkin, head of the influential St. Irenaeus of Lyon Information Center (SILIC), who helped establish links between the Moscow Patriarchate and anticult organizations in Denmark and Germany (Shterin 2001: 316). A former émigré to the United States and a public theologian with a PhD in history, Dvorkin argued that Russian citizens were in danger of being brainwashed by “totalitarian cults” and used the growing anxiety to push for state control over religious expression (Dvorkin 2006: 316). Many religious studies scholars and some Russian Orthodox theologians consider Dvorkin’s approach to NRMs to be weak

scholarship, often filled with irresponsible errors (Kanterov 2002, Steniaiev 2006, Kuznetsov 2006). Moreover, even staunch anti-cultists have found it difficult to prove that most of the targeted movements engaged in illegal activity (Shterin 2001: 317). But the impact of his writings was not meant to be scholarly. Tapping into the concerns of worried parents, Dvorkin succeeded at influencing popular attitudes. His work has been instrumental in promoting hostile attitudes to alternative religious movements.

Russian anti-cultism linked new religious movements and forms of spirituality to cultural threats of globalization and, more specifically, from Westernization. This anxiety is not unique to Russia: in other parts of Europe and the world, NRMs are viewed as globalizing agents that threaten local cultures (Robbins 2004: 5). As a result, New Religious Movements were redefined as harmful to the “ethno-religious balance” of the country: disturbances at best, targeted programs of destruction at worst (Shterin 2001: 315). As Marat Shterin explains, the state was reaching for the tried-and-true model of dealing with religious diversity in times of insecurity: invoking “tradition” to limit religious freedom (ibid. 310). Anti-cult discourse prepared Russian society for a new wave of legal changes, which rearranged the post-Soviet religious free-for-all into a hierarchical space where religions seen as traditional were privileged (Shterin 2001, 2016; Turoma and Aitamurto 2016).

The turn towards tradition in questions of religion is often viewed as part of Russia’s general illiberal turn, marking the country as the enlightened West’s backward, authoritarian Other. The Russian case is indeed striking, because the timeline of religious liberalization and satanic panic was collapsed into less than a decade. However, anxiety-fueled traditionalism is far from being unique to Russia. States around the world engage in management of religious diversity, which turns more restrictive when faced by complications such as migration, terrorism and international conflicts. The United States and Britain dealt with the challenges posed by new religiosity in much the same way as Russia: with disproportionate anxiety fueled by media sensationalism. Moreover, as noted before, Russian anticultists borrowed Western evidence and rhetoric: English “brainwashing” became Russian *kodirovanie* (“coding”), *zombirovanie* (“zombification”) and *programmirovanie* (“programming”) (Shterin 2001: 319). According to Shterin, Russia’s anti-cultism, at its root, was an attempt to join the West in its ostensibly more advanced approaches to handling religious freedom (ibid. 316).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Anti-cultist waves that swept up America, UK and later continental Europe, decreased earlier than they have in Russia. According to Urban, this process was facilitated in the U.S. by a legal tradition that valued religious freedom (2015: 14). While this tradition was no doubt a useful resource in combating anti-cultism, progressive rhetoric alone does not guarantee liberal attitudes or legislation. The difference between Russian and American anti-cultism needs to be elucidated further. First, the U.S. had more time and economic stability to adjust to new forms of spirituality. New and alternative movements were able to undergo a process of alignment with the wider society and its institutions (Bromley 2004: 92). Second, American culture is shaped in no small part by its economic system, which allows for normalizing some

In the new century, changes in law and governmental rhetoric have resulted in a much more regulated religious landscape. The 1997 Federal Law on Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Associations sought to address two problems articulated in Russian anti-cult discourse: threats to individual and family well-being and threats to the state itself (Shterin 2001: 312). The new law accorded a special role to “historical” religions, of which Russian Orthodoxy was named most important, recognized for its “special role ... in the history of Russia, in the establishment and development of its spirituality and culture” (Federal Law No. 125). The law also limited and regulated missionary work, especially that done by foreigners.

The idea that new religious movements posed a political danger has gained even more importance in the first decades of the new century. The government was seeking to regain control over the country’s ideological crisis through managing religious expression (Turoma and Aitamurto 2016: 4) and re-invigorating the rhetoric of spiritual values as a national virtue (Østbø 2017: 201, Rousselet 2020: 47). In this context, the Russian Orthodox Church was able to provide a sense of traditional spirituality (Kormina and Shtyrkov 2015: 34).<sup>12</sup> The Church has helped the political elite reinforce the notion of tradition as Russia’s cultural resource that needs to be protected from global threats, such as the rootless cosmopolitanism of New Religious Movements (Turoma and Aitamurto 2016: 2).

Today, a cautious attitude towards many religious groups perceived as non-traditional is commonplace. Many minority religious groups find themselves in a vulnerable position: they are dehumanized by influential anti-cultists (Zygmunt 2018), misrepresented in the media (Orlova 2017: 208) or declared extremist (TASS 2017). Many groups gain public visibility only in unpleasant circumstances, such as the 2011 court trial against the Bhagavad Gita in the city of Tomsk (Timoshchuk and Fil’kin 2013)<sup>13</sup> or the Russian government’s 2017 ban of Jehovah’s Witnesses (Knox 2019). Simplistic anti-cultist attitudes can also

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countercultural ideas as lifestyle options. Finally, alternative spirituality is no longer the primary scapegoat for religion-related anxieties in the U.S. Since the 2000s, the country has been preoccupied with extremist ideologies that identify as Islamic, which has resulted in legislation and media coverage that was hostile to Muslims (Dunwoody and McFarland 2017; Gillum 2018). Because the threat of cults has receded from the Western imagination, the Russian government and public’s ongoing mistrust of alternative spirituality seems striking.

<sup>12</sup> The real number of practicing Orthodox believers is impossible to determine, and approximations are difficult. According to studies conducted by the Levada Center in the decade between 2010 and 2020, the percentage of respondents who identify as Orthodox remains between 65 and 70 percent, although not all of them are practicing believers (Levada 2011, 2020). What this number points to is the current cultural role of the Russian Orthodox Church as a religious “norm.”

<sup>13</sup> The Bhagavad Gita was brought in on charges of extremism; after a public outcry in Russia and India, it was found not guilty.

be seen in some Russian scholarship on the subject (Sharapova 2015, Ivleva 2016).<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, spirituality in Russia remains diverse and fluid, and alternative spirituality in particular continues to flourish. Esoteric literature is widely available in mainstream bookstores (Gorokhova 2018: 140). Social media allows spiritual seekers to forge connections, organize gatherings, and share creative work, experiences and knowledge. Such communities and diffuse networks are numerous. This is certainly the case for various communities of Vedic Wisdom. Even a cursory glance at the websites and social media accounts of particular movements suggests that their activity has not been curbed. ISKCON groups continue providing free meals to those in need, popular Vedic lecturers continue touring the country, and ecovillagers develop unique ways to participate in the political realm.

## 1.5 Approaches to alternative spirituality in Russia

Between large-scale analyses of social developments and in-depth case studies, scholarship on Russian alternative spirituality is diverse and vibrant. The history of alternative spirituality in Russia has been marked by a traumatic and exhilarating political transformation. Understandably, the post-Soviet transition has been the focus of much scholarship on the subject. Whether studying particular movements or sketching a wider picture of the milieu, scholars have analyzed new forms of spirituality in the context of this profound break and its elements: Westernization, economic change and ideological crisis.

Alexander Panchenko suggested that New Religious Movements which originated in transition-era Russia can be approached as “crisis cults” (2004: 126). Like “cargo cults,” these movements reflected a change in cultural conditions: the collapse of Soviet Union and Soviet ideology. Scholars explain problems associated with this change differently. Panicked voices such as Vladlena Ivleva’s argue that after the transition, Russians were left vulnerable to Western influences because they are disappointed in established religious institutions, economically insecure, socially isolated and ill-served by the internet (Ivleva 2016). Oleg Khlyakin renders the point more subtly, arguing that although Westernization is happening, it is a natural process. He calls attention to Westernization from below, not from above: a transformation of practices that corresponds to wider social changes and responds to people’s needs (Khlyakin 2017: 135).

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, some Russian studies are respectful and even sympathetic to specific movements: for example, Vladimir Sokol’s analysis of the role of the Bhagavad Gita in Russian metaphysical thought (2013), Natalia Antonova’s phenomenological approach to its social perception (2013), and Sergei Ivanenko’s studies of controversial movements such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, ISKCON and Scientology (2008). Ivanenko’s work has been criticized by anti-cultists for being too sympathetic (see, for example, Dvorkin 2006: 241).

Arguably the most important form of Western influence in post-Soviet Russia was economic. Since religious and economic liberalization in the country happened simultaneously, the concept of a religious marketplace rings particularly true here. Melissa Caldwell shows that in the 1990s, spiritual seekers often approached their involvement in New Religious Movements not as individual inner journeys but as practical decisions about resources or job opportunities (Caldwell 2005: 19). Some scholars are pessimistic about the “consumerist” nature of new forms of spiritualities: for example, Vera Neveleva and Elizaveta Shchetinina argue that “alternative religion,” unlike Russian Orthodoxy or “traditional Islam,” operates as a market, which constitutes a threat to society’s stability and people’s identity (2013). Such arguments paint the picture with broad strokes, linking religious diversity and experimentation to the free-market economy and technological changes, which are in turn identified with the West. By contrast, some scholars show that there has been a lot of continuity between pre- and post-transition forms of spirituality and religion (Luehrmann 2005, 2011; Smolkin-Rothrock 2014: 173; Kormina and Shtyrkov 2015, Urbańczyk 2017).

A subsection of scholarship focuses on the consequences, rather than causes, of the explosion of alternative spirituality. Marat Shterin’s work has been seminal in this regard. He analyzed how the state has used anxiety around new spirituality to help rebuild Russian national identity during and after the 1990s (2001). Viktoria Osipova recently traced this process of domesticating new forms of spirituality in the post-Soviet decades, pointing out the absence of a shared language that would be accepted by both religious and state actors (2018).

Studies of Russian alternative spirituality tend to approach alternative spirituality as a whole or from the perspective of discrete units: they either focus on the impact of the political developments of the past three decades, or explore specific movements. But the spiritual milieu is not made up of discrete movements: it is both internally diverse and intertwined. Moreover, it is shaped by many national and global factors in addition to the post-Soviet transition and the state’s subsequent turn to the language of tradition.

There are questions that neither macro- nor micro-perspectives can address effectively. How do specific movements and communities relate to each other in the spiritual milieu? How do varied ideas coming from different sources coalesce into internally diverse but recognizable traditions such as Vedic Wisdom? How is spiritual authority legitimized in this landscape, and what enables divergent interpretations to be negotiated? How does Russian alternative spirituality persist in the relatively hostile conditions of the 2010s? And, finally, how does it relate to the wider world of global cultural flows and technological changes? These are the questions I take up in this dissertation, by turning neither to a single case nor to the spiritual milieu as a whole, but rather to a specific node in that network, a node that brings together different movements and transforms them: Vedic Wisdom.

## 2. RESEARCH DESIGN

This project aims to offer a nuanced glimpse into post- and post-post-Soviet alternative spirituality by analyzing a cross-section of discourses associated with Vedic Wisdom (*vedicheskaia mudrost'*) in contemporary Russia. I approach Vedic Wisdom as a discursive node, a sort of spiritual crossroads that reveals the mutual influence and interrelation of movements that are usually approached as isolated case studies. In the following section, I will introduce my research object and questions, describe my research process and discuss some ethical considerations.

### 2.1 Research object and research questions

The broadly defined goal of my research is to answer how alternative spirituality works in today's Russia, and show how it is shaped by national and global factors such as nationalist nostalgia, rising social conservatism, neoliberal practices of the self, and the digital mediation of global cultures. In my approach to alternative spirituality, I am less interested in the complexities of specific movements or trajectories of spiritual seekers than in the larger dynamics of this dense environment. Within this field, ideas circulate freely, forming a complex landscape. Delimiting a research object can be tricky, but the concept of "Vedic Wisdom" captures the internal variety and interconnectedness of the alternative spirituality milieu rather well.

"Vedic Wisdom" is an overdetermined emic term that is used by different movements, groups and actors in Russian alternative spirituality circles. To different people, it means different things – but also, confusingly, some of the same things. For this reason, I approach Vedic Wisdom as a discursive crossroads: a point of connection that provides a cross-section of the spiritual milieu in motion. The meanings of the term extend globally and fall into three clusters: Indian-based spirituality, Slavic- or Russian-based spirituality, and lifestyle/popular psychology.

The first connotation refers to the Indian spiritual tradition, which is represented by the International Society of Krishna Consciousness and other Hindu-based groups. However, the popularity of ideas based on the Indian Vedas far exceeds the boundaries of these religious communities, and they are often invoked as part of generic "Eastern" spirituality. The second connotation of Vedic Wisdom is linked to pre-Christian Russian or Slavic spirituality. It may refer to the Slavic-Aryan Vedas, a number of scriptures of purportedly ancient origin that are relied on by some neo-Pagan movements. It can also refer more broadly to the idea of an ancient Golden Age, which is said to have taken place on the present territory of Russia. Finally, to a much broader audience, Vedic Wisdom is primarily relevant as a set of lifestyle choices or popular psychological advice rather than a doctrine from a set of scriptures. In individual spiritual journeys, the Vedic lifestyle may be based on any of these sources. Some common features of this

lifestyle, embraced by people regardless of their religious affiliation, include a holistic diet, emphasis on unity with nature and fellow humans, and adherence to a conservative vision of gender roles.

I treat Vedic Wisdom as a cloud of references, associations and practices that sometimes have the same origin, sometimes compete, sometimes echo each other and sometimes appear as distinct. Various versions of Vedic Wisdom may encounter each other in real life, for example, at events like the Child of Nature festival or in a spiritual search of one practitioner. What interests me is therefore not any particular path but the crossroads itself.

Vedic Wisdom is an example of an emergent tradition, where tradition is understood as a process of the establishment, transmission and transformation of forms – in this case, forms of belief, conceptualizations of the world, stated values and spiritual practices. Like the alternative spirituality milieu in general, Vedic Wisdom is not homogeneous or stable, but rather full of paradoxes, points of tension and generative encounters. Ideas develop, diverge or merge. Individuals alter their practices or adopt new ones. The discursive node of Vedic Wisdom renders these processes visible.

My research questions fall into two clusters. The first cluster concerns the role of Vedic Wisdom in the Russian spiritual milieu:

1. What can be understood as Vedic Wisdom in contemporary Russia?
2. How do discourses of Vedic Wisdom interact with each other and negotiate divergent claims?

The second cluster turns outward, looking at the way Vedic Wisdom functions in Russian society and broader global context. I am particularly interested in explaining why this alternative spiritual discourse persists in a state that is ostensibly hostile to spiritual experimentation, as well as in interrogating whether and how Vedic Wisdom is implicated in some mainstream aspects of contemporary society.

3. How does alternative spirituality persist in contemporary Russia?
4. How are discourses of Vedic Wisdom shaped by global factors?

## **2.2 Research process and methodology**

Vedic Wisdom is a vernacular belief tradition that must be studied as a changing and contested field. To understand its dynamics and study how individuals negotiate what it means, I turned to ethnography. I have conducted research in both traditional folklore settings of face-to-face interaction that includes instances of performance, and in digital contexts where practices and ideas that compose belief are diffused and developed.

Interviews and participant observation gave me access to a variety of personal experiences, exposing the complex role of Vedic Wisdom in the lives of individuals and groups. People that I have interviewed were involved in the realm of alternative spirituality or had an interest in popular psychology. They valued what

they understood as Vedic Wisdom, discussed it with friends and used it as a guide for structuring lifestyles and interpreting life events. The ethnographic method enabled me to observe competing truth claims, tensions, affinities and hybridities that emerge as people pursue different versions of Vedic Wisdom.

I began fieldwork in 2012, building on personal connections to people involved in the Anastasia movement or the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, as well as those interested in alternative spirituality in general. My work was conducted in a milieu where different ideas and spiritual paths coexist and intermingle, similar to New Age cultures such as the city of Glastonbury (Bowman 2013). Unlike Glastonbury, however, my field was dispersed across several locations and held together both by personal friendships and specific projects, such as the Child of Nature (Ditya Prirody) community, the School of Protective Crafts (Shkola Oberezhnogo Rukodeliya) and other non-profit and entrepreneurial ventures.

Between 2012–2018, I have conducted 35 semi-structured interviews and ten trips for the purpose of participant observation in St Petersburg, Yoshkar-Ola and the Pskov region. All interviews were conducted in Russian, and I did the transcriptions and translations myself. I attended or volunteered at the Child of Nature festival and other conferences, workshops and spontaneous gatherings. While my fieldwork took place mainly in the summer and occasionally during shorter visits in the winter, friendships with some of my informants developed on a more continuous and permanent basis. Given my embeddedness in the social world of my field, my research encompassed a lot of informal conversations and interactions in person and online. I also conducted online ethnography on a flexible schedule. My research can be divided into two phases.

### **Phase 1 (2012–2014)**

In Phase 1, I conducted interviews and participant observation and analyzed digital materials produced or recommended by people I met personally. This phase resulted in two articles. Article 1 is based on my fieldwork at the Child of Nature festival, and Article 2 is based on ethnography and an analysis of online content shared by people I met in the course of research.

The primary site of my fieldwork was the Child of Nature festival near St Petersburg, which has been taking place annually since 2006. The festival brings together different groups focused on personal development or spirituality in a family-friendly atmosphere. Participants offer and attend seminars and lectures on specific esoteric traditions, song and dance performances, fire shows, as well as practical workshops on crafting, cooking, green living, juggling and walking on coals. I participated in the festival in 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013: once as a kitchen worker, three times as an administrator/receptionist, and once a regular attendee. Volunteering at the festival provided me the knowledge with the schedule, types of activities and various communities represented there. It also

allowed me to socialize with the organizers, the workshop conductors and regular attendees.

During this research phase, I also attended and participated in other relevant events and initiatives, as opportunities afforded it: the Congress of Vedic Culture of Aryans-Indoslavs, meetings of ISKCON and the School of Protective Crafts in St. Petersburg, and a Vedic Femininity flash mob in Yoshkar-Ola. I also visited two ecovillages in Pskov and Yaroslavl regions.

## **Phase 2 (2018–19)**

In the second phase, I conducted digital ethnography (Hine 2000, Kozinets 2010, Hjorth, Horst, Galloway and Bell 2017) and informal conversations, which provided the basis for two other articles. Ideas and practices of Vedic Wisdom are diffused, transformed and negotiated online, which is why I also analyze the digital presence. To do so, I rely on scholarship on digital media and in particular internet memes (Borenstein 2004, Kien 2013, Milner 2013, Heimo and Koski 2014, Laineste and Voolaid 2016), paying special attention to memes' political implications (Papacharissi 2015, Denisova 2019).

Article 3 is based on my analysis of the books, lectures and online presence of popular Vedic lecturer Oleg Torsunov, as well as of discussions of his work on Russian websites, forums, social networks and in the media. The materials I collected appeared between 2003 and 2018. Article 4 is an analysis of internet memes produced in an online community associated with the Ringing Cedars of Russia. I have corresponded with the administrator of the group, though I have not met him in person, and obtained his permission to reproduce the images.

Each of the four articles includes more detailed discussions of methodology used in the particular study and explains in more depth the conceptual basis behind my analysis of festivals (Article 1), humor (Article 2), legitimation (Article 3) and internet memes (Article 4).

## **2.3 Ethical considerations**

My approach to research ethics is informed by the long-standing tradition in the humanities and social sciences of problematizing the knowledge extraction model of fieldwork. Such concerns have been brought up in anthropology, indigenous and feminist studies, and, of course, folkloristics. I am committed to challenging the existing power relations inscribed in the process of research involving human subjects, but I also acknowledge the difficulties of putting the theories of non-mastery to work in the field. As with many emancipatory ideals, this one is easier pronounced than practiced: between the two extremes of the researcher as a self-serving, careless outsider and the researcher as a nonviolent, sympathetic insider, there lie the muddled entanglements of real life, from which scholarly work is not exempt.

This project is the culmination of my interest in, respect for and frustration with the world of alternative spirituality, and the product of my grappling with the ideas I encountered there, as well as with others' interpretations of these ideas. Friendship was an important, though not uncomplicated, part of this process. Common cultural background, long-term relationships, and a tendency towards obsessive meditation on existential questions bind me to this community. Growing up in transition-era Russia, I had an early exposure to its religious effervescence, from varieties of New Age to forms of Protestant Christianity. My family's massage therapist was a psychic. My friends who practiced historical reconstruction identified as Pagan. I encountered Vladimir Megre's *Ringed Cedars of Russia* books in 2000, listened to Oleg Torsunov's lectures for the first time in 2008, and was given a copy of the Bhagavad Gita by a Russian Krishna devotee in London in 2011. My best childhood friend got involved in the Child of Nature community around 2006. This knowledge and these connections made it easy for me to enter the field.

I planned to conduct this PhD project in the spirit of collaboration and democratic participation. This commitment was informed by my training in gender studies and folkloristics, two fields that have long histories of taking seriously the questions of ethics and power in the field. Feminist and gender theory taught me to reflect on the workings of power in the research situation and seek to alleviate their harmful effects by informing people of the process of research, protecting their privacy or empowering them to decide how they want to be cited. Folkloristics challenged me to conduct my research as a project of collaborative theorizing with people I met in the field. Because the discipline has needed to reflect on its origins in fetishizing the folk, folklore studies today is well-positioned to reject the foundational binary of cultural research: the "phenomena" that are studied and the "theory" that provides the tools for this study. Charles Briggs argues that we can break down the relationship between the researcher and the researched "by collaborating on theoretical issues with non-academics who reflect deeply on the poetics and politics of vernacular culture – people we used to call 'the folk'" (2008: 92). This idea is both ethically and epistemologically radical, and I admire and uphold it. I have, however, found it difficult to heed this call fully in my work. Of course, I would have loved for my conversations with others in the field to be mutually informative and enriching at all times, but as my work continued and deepened, the rosy vision of a fully participatory ethnography needed some adjustment.

The moment I whipped out the recorder, I forced a transition from an interaction among friends to a research interview. This transition was usually smooth but never seamless. The structural position of a researcher necessarily separated me from my interlocutors, and divisions frequently multiplied when interaction began. Some people responded with enthusiasm, at times tempered with confusion. To others, however, my project seemed suspicious and threatening, and for good reason. It did, after all, originate in Western academic discourse, which, given its historical reliance on rationalistic models, is generally mistrusted in the realm of alternative spirituality. As the project went on, more ideological and

interpretational rifts occurred alongside moments of agreement. In the field I was often chastised by acquaintances or strangers for failing to conform to Vedic norms (e.g. for walking with insufficient grace or wearing shorts rather than a long skirt). In one unpleasant episode, I refused to help one self-described Vedic man, who made unwelcome advances to a friend of mine, in winning her heart. The frustrated suitor then tried to show me my place by saying that until I got married, I was just a little girl.<sup>15</sup>

Stephen Tyler describes the postmodern ethnographic ideal as “cooperative story-making that, in one of its ideal forms, would result in a polyphonic text” (Tyler 1986: 126). But life is still messier than this vision of collaborative multi-vocality. My experience was more in line with Robert A. Georges and Michael O. Jones’s description of fieldwork as an activity that

entails much more than merely knowing what to observe and how to record, process, and present it. The field worker must explain his or her presence and purpose to others, gain their confidence and cooperation, and develop and maintain mutually acceptable relationships. These requirements create dilemmas, produce confrontations, demand clarifications and compromises, and evoke reflection and introspection that one can neither fully anticipate nor prepare for in advance (Georges and Jones 1980: 2).

Fieldwork, according to Georges and Jones, is a complex field of personal relationships requiring decision-making and compromise, not simply a trove of knowledge ready to be discovered, or an unproblematic collaborative utopia.

I must acknowledge that the result of my project is not a polyphonic text. It is very much a product of my labor of observation, selection and meaning-making. I am indebted to many people for their insights, but I have also disagreed with them and found some of their positions and activities to be ill-advised. I believe that some aspects of alternative spirituality can and have been harmful to the individuals that pursue them: notably, restrictive gender norms and the emphasis on individual responsibility for one’s misfortune.

I did, however, strive to enter interactions with a commitment to be led through the internal logic of the ideological position that my interlocutor inhabited at the moment. Such an attitude allowed me to discover commonalities between the worlds of academia and alternative spirituality through which I moved while conducting this project. For example, I have shared with people I met in the field a deep concern for the environment, an interest in the complexities of establishing legitimacy, and a commitment to pursuing ever more precise understandings of life. Ethnography conveniently forces the researcher to be patient, humble and open to new insights, and my research has benefited from that.

It also benefited from existing friendships in the field. A long friendship incorporates a history of adjusting to each other’s new ideas and changing selves.

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<sup>15</sup> In that specific instance, the moral victory was mine: I simply got up from my seat and towered over him. Unfortunately, it took the involvement of my friend’s father for the stalking to stop.

My research project was in this sense yet another thing to incorporate into the community and its lore. Exploration of different ideas has always been a central characteristic of alternative spirituality, but even so, it is some testament to the diversity and openness of the specific community where I conducted most of my research that it can accommodate both a committed Krishna devotee and an agnostic Western-educated researcher.

I find it productive to think of fieldwork not as an unproblematic collaboration, but as a process of vernacular theorizing: a long, complex, shifting conversation with others about making sense of the world. Interviews and conversations at which I was present often took the form of discussion of philosophical or psychological issues, where insights were shared, points of agreement negotiated, and positions articulated. Sometimes these positions emerged as rock-solid, and sometimes flexible or vague. After all, people rarely identify with a specific ideological position fully or permanently; our ideas are often internally divided and change over time. Over the course of many single conversations, people's commitments subside or radicalize, and, over the years, significantly transform.

This is what I mean by ethical fieldwork: being present as a fellow thinker and a friend. Instead of an obsession with purity, I propose a prosaic view of fieldwork, relying on principles I have developed based on experience, conversations with others, and theoretical readings. My point of departure is valuing compromised and incomplete togetherness: co-presence and interaction in a shared circumstance, larger community, and discursive sphere.

In the end, however, the project was shaped as much, if not more, by specific practical decisions than by my own tortured reflections on positionality. I have followed the accepted practice of consent forms for interviews, trusted my own judgement for participant observation at large gatherings, and clarified the meanings and possibilities of publishing this research through ongoing conversations with key people who were part of the project over time. I have changed almost all the names and identifying details of people I mention, with the exceptions of public figures and my dear friend Anna, who successfully campaigned for her right not to be anonymous.

Since I began the study, the milieu has continued to change. I want to honor not only people's right to privacy but also their right to change course. For that reason, let me emphasize that people's words and opinions are snippets in time. Several people I interviewed have drastically changed their opinions or grown into a new synthesis: some have become Krishna devotees, some moved to ecological intentional communities, some participate in Neo-Pagan rituals, and some have moved through and away from these practices. For most of them, affiliation with a particular denomination or religion has not been so important as to preclude our conversations.

To sum up, the central principle of my project's methodology overlaps with the main focus of my research: negotiation. With people who have contributed to this study, I have negotiated particular points about the research and discussed the role of different ideas in our lives. Through these discussions, we produce a shared reality. It is this "negotiated reality" (Crapanzano 1980) that this study describes.

### 3. THEORETICAL TOOLKIT

In this project, I primarily approach Vedic Wisdom as a vernacular tradition rather than a formulated religious doctrine or a sociopolitical phenomenon, though it should certainly be analyzed from these perspectives as well. For the purposes of this project, I ground my theoretical approach in the discipline of folkloristics, which is distinctly appropriate for the study of tradition in general, and traditions of belief in particular. Folkloristics also offers a theoretical language that discourages grand and simplistic statements about the cultural life of humans – in other words, about the relationship between the “folk” and the “lore.” I find the discipline’s toolkit of “humble theory” (Noyes 2016) indispensable in approaching a tradition that is rather ambivalently positioned. At the same time, I draw on related disciplines of religious studies, media studies and cultural theory in order to analyze specific aspects of my material: the questions of legitimation, belonging, and consumption.

#### 3.1 Humble theory, the folk, and lore

Folkloristics is a diverse field that has been shaped by attempts to define it, from Maria Leach’s list of twenty-one definitions of folklore (Leach 1949) to Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens’s admission that “[f]olklore is many things, and it’s almost impossible to define succinctly” (2005: 1). Nevertheless, there is no shortage of definitions, some of them quite succinct, such as Dan Ben-Amos’s “artistic communication in small groups” (1971: 13).<sup>16</sup> In my own project, I rely on the definition of folklore given by Simon Bronner: “*traditional knowledge put into, and drawing from, practice*” (2017: 46). This formulation suits best my focus on the emergence, transmission and transformation of one alternative spirituality tradition.

At its origin in ideological projects of 19th century Europe, folkloristics aimed to recover the authentic expressions of national identity in the life of the folk. Updating this goal for subsequent social realities required scholars to process changing conditions. Engagement with these conditions resulted in vibrant debates about the field’s object of study, its methodology and the underlying philosophical assumptions.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> There is value in listing the “many things” that make up folklore, and discussions of the discipline rarely go without some fleshing out of such basic definitions. Ben-Amos himself distinguished folklore from other disciplines by describing its objects of expertise: the study of folklore, he explained, focuses “on expressive behaviour that is variably described as local, vernacular, traditional, and the like, which involve symbols; verbal, visual, musical, and kinetic communications; and belief, history, and imagination” (Ben-Amos 2018: 205).

<sup>17</sup> See Bronner 2016 for a thorough account of key debates within folkloristics about the nature of the discipline.

Folkloristics is perhaps best conceived of as a series of productive tensions, the primary one being the aforementioned tension between the “folk” and the “lore”: between human groups and the cultural material that they produce and transmit. With this focus came the discipline’s defining questions. What are these groups? What is tradition? These two main questions of folkloristic inquiry expand into others: “What commonsense relationships exist between bodies of knowledge and groups of people? What relationship should scholars posit between cultural forms and social structures? Do such linkages dissolve over time?” (Noyes 2016: 57).

These questions guide my scholarly interest in Vedic Wisdom, and I will discuss the folkloristic insights into both the “folk” and the “lore” parts of my object of study. But before I turn to folkloristic theories, let me first discuss the relationship of folkloristics and theory – an issue that is both highly contested and very relevant for my approach to alternative spirituality.

### **Folkloristics as theory**

There is something ironic in turning to folkloristics for a theoretical grounding, given the long-standing tradition within the discipline to describe its relation to theory as oppositional, lacking, or ambivalent at best. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western academia was swept by visions of “Grand Theory”: from pre-war desires for an integrated framework that would explain society in all its aspects (Parsons 1937) to post-war theoretical projects that sought to deconstruct that society but in the process turned into forms of social capital (Nicoll and Gregg 2008, Thorkelson 2008). When it came to incorporating these theoretical visions into scholarly research, folklore departments were slower and more ambivalent than other fields.

This cautious approach has had costs: pragmatically, it contributed to disciplinary marginalization; intellectually, it encouraged fragmentation: without a unifying theoretical language, folklorists could not easily talk to each other. At the same time, the folkloristic resistance to grand theory produced a useful epistemological discomfort, which continues to offer theoretical advantages. The folkloristic perspective can help scholars articulate how transmission of culture happens without subsuming it into a sweeping narrative, but rather continuing to produce insights that illuminate it.

American folkloristics has been a crucial site for problematizing theory. In other contexts, folklorists have either not been impacted by the post-war theory craze to the same extent or have rejected the idea of “Grand Theory” for their own reasons: in Germany, for example, it was abandoned because of its association with Nazi ideology (Dow 2008: 56). Meanwhile, in North America, there were institutional reasons for taking on the practical and philosophical problem of theory seriously. Initially, resistance to global theoretical developments was promoted by Richard Dorson and other scholars as a way to secure the disciplinary position of folkloristics by restricting its theoretical scope to studying folklore – or,

even more narrowly, American folklore (Briggs 2008: 94–95). A different approach was advocated by Alan Dundes, who linked the discipline’s institutional crisis in the 80s to “the continued lack of innovation in what we might term ‘grand theory’” (Dundes 2005: 387). For Dundes, engaging with theory would help folklore improve its standing in universities as well as enrich its interpretative capacity (ibid. 389). Dundes’s appeal to folklorists has resulted in a vibrant discussion at the October 2005 American Folklore Society meeting, which later resulted in a special issue of the *Journal of Folklore Research* (2008) and an edited collection *Grand Theory in Folkloristics* (Haring 2016). In his review of the collection, Ben-Amos summed up the responses to Dundes’s call as follows: “the responders and the commentators balked at his aspiration for grandeur but agreed with his call for a theoretical foundation for folklore” (Ben-Amos 2018: 205). While some of the responses were context-specific, many offered generalizable insights into the possibilities of such a theoretical foundation for the discipline.

First, the conversation crystallized some problematic aspects of aspirations to grand or simply strong explanatory theories. Theory can easily become an exercise of epistemological domination. The field of folklore study, for historical reasons, has to be particularly wary of this possibility. As Lee Haring puts it in the introduction to the special issue, American folklorists “are uncomfortable with the rhetoric of Grand Theory, ... refuse its authoritarian stance, and ... have gravitated towards the lower strata of societies” (Haring 2008: 4). Several contributors also pointed out that chasing theory for the sake of its social capital is not a worthwhile project. Richard Bauman, for example, recognized that being seen as producing generalizable theory is good disciplinary PR, but argued that “...any effort to proclaim or construct a grand theory for folklore is a misguided enterprise” (Bauman 2008: 29). Citing C. Wright Mills’ critique of “Grand Theory,” Gary Alan Fine and Kirin Narayan list its features that continue to trouble scholars: excessive generality, abstraction and convolutedness (Mills 1959, Fine 2008: 13, Narayan 2008: 84). The bottom line, it seems, is that if folklore were to develop a grander theory, it might benefit institutionally, but lose out intellectually.

However, there are drawbacks to not having a strong theoretical tradition: disciplinary marginalization, most obviously, but also fragmentation and a tendency towards descriptiveness. Margaret Mills acknowledges that “visibly effective theory-building, including cultural (dare I add, critical?) meta-theory building, helps to maintain our productive presence in the academy” (Mills 2008: 27). Dorothy Noyes also writes that the field’s “straightforward status anxiety” (Noyes 2016: 11) and “theory envy” (ibid. 12) is rooted in “challenges for disciplinary self-presentation within the hierarchical knowledge structure of universities” (ibid. 60). One pertinent example of such marginalization of folkloristics is the lack of acknowledgment of folkloristic theories in religious studies publications, despite folklore scholarship having prefigured and influenced the turn to lived religion in religious studies (Primiano 2012: 383). In addition to this lack of external visibility, the absence of a strong unifying theory contributes to the field’s fragmentation. Theory is needed, argues Gary Alan Fine, to “bring concepts together [and] knit ... together empirical projects” (Fine 2008: 16). Similarly, Margaret

Mills writes that folklorists need to develop “styles of interaction (research and presentation, publishing and reading practices) for identifying parallel cases and analyses across boundaries of space, time, and discipline” (2008: 24). Finally, without a theoretical dimension, research risks slipping into descriptiveness, surface-level interpretation and celebration of local idiosyncrasies without contextual analysis or comparative reflection (Dow 2008: 60, Mills 2008: 22–23). Fortunately, careful description has long pushed folkloristics to larger questions: “...compelling collections of texts lead to the question of what they all mean” (Fine 2008: 11). In order to continue working together to make sense of human culture, folklorists do need theory. What is more, they have theory: a theory that has itself been extensively theorized.

Theory, after all, does not always have to be grand. The term itself means many different things (Fine 2008: 13). At its etymological basis in ancient Greek, theory means spectatorship; in modern Europe, it became a mode of being that was the opposite of practice (Williams 1983: 316, Narayan 2008: 85). Theory, therefore, can be understood as observation and description, as opposed to action. Another useful definition of theory is translation. Margaret Mills describes it as such: “all theory describes something (the data or phenomena theorized about) in terms of something else (ascribed logics, patterns, processes, meanings, values). The interpretive theoretical relationship is closer to metaphor (‘It’s like X’) than prescription (‘It is X’)” (Mills 2008: 22). Theory can therefore be seen as an attempt to render something more legible by comparing it to something else, often to an abstract model. As such, theory can be softer and more flexible than it is sometimes credited with being.

Folklorists have sought to articulate approaches that would recover these ideas of spectatorship and translation from beneath the influential visions of grand theory. Dorothy Noyes’ “humble theory” is one such framework (2016). Noyes advocates for “the ambivalence of the middle position” (ibid. 11) between “grand theory and local interpretation” (ibid. 15). The concept of “humble theory” highlights advantages of the “provincial” discipline of folkloristics (ibid. 11): unwillingness “to claim objective scholarly authority over an unproblematic domain of reality” (ibid. 61) and “a healthy suspicion of totalizing assertions” (ibid. 60). Humble theory, according to Noyes, is humble because it acknowledges the limitations to which grand theory is blind: it “recognizes that all our work is essay, in the etymological sense: a trying-out of interpretation, a provisional training to see how it looks” (ibid. 13).

One way to conceptualize a humble theoretical “middle ground” is to recognize that theory is always intertwined with method: how we understand things is related to how we reach that understanding. Haring identifies the “movement between theory and method” as characteristic of the American folklore tradition that culminates in Noyes’s “humble theory” (2008: 4). Margaret Mills writes that “[t]heory is, reciprocally, method-driven; the analytic or interpretive models and questions we are able to pose and test are enabled or restricted by our technologies (and in turn our techniques) of observation” (Mills 2008: 19). This observation can be pushed further: theory itself is method. It is the method of making meaning

through observation, description and translation into a more abstract, therefore metaphorical, language.

The “middle position” described by Noyes is the best location for theory-as-translation. A theorist must build on observation to generate insights and communicate them in other contexts which they might illuminate. Inspired by C. Wright Mills’ critique, Narayan helps imagine what such a humble middle position would look like. He asserts “the value of flexibly moving between (1) levels of generality and (2) registers of language” (2008: 84). The more abstract a theory is, the weaker it becomes as the work of translation; the more grounded and flexible it is, the more effective its abstractions. Similarly, Margaret Mills argues that an explanatory theory needs to be grounded in order to work: “One question that must always be asked is thus ‘explanatory for whom?’ *Whose* questions does it answer, generated by what dialogic process?” (Mills 2008: 20). To be grounded, theory must be “connected to and reflective of the patterns it seeks to critique in a sufficiently obvious manner – to be so perceived by its intended audience” (ibid. 25). What marks a good theory, for Mills, is its communicative ability: “[a]ptness, resonance, and suggestive power” (ibid. 22).

A theory’s ability to move between the local and the abstract also means openness to learn from various contexts. Humble theory keeps thinkers teachable. It involves “remaining open on principle to examining any kind of cultural production and considering knowledge from any source on its merits” (Noyes 2016: 60). Folklorists have long solicited insights from people whose work and traditions they have studied (Dundes 1966, Narayan 1995). As a theoretical stance, this flexibility becomes a commitment to translating between “theory encountered through fieldwork ... from the ground up” to theory acquired “from the institution down” (Narayan 2008: 85).

Humble theory’s location between epistemological worlds means that it is not only the site of translation but also the site of conflict. I would argue, however, that this is less of a drawback than an honest reflection of the conflicted nature of all intellectual enterprise. Holding irreconcilable interpretations allows theory to become an ongoing process of working out in a series of conversations. Newton Garver suggests as much in his contribution to the special issue of the *Journal of Folklore Research*. Garver, who is otherwise rather theory-sceptical – he prefers “data” and “accurate records” to the temptations of abstraction – provides a compelling vision of a theory that is based not on “key concepts and specifying criteria” but rather on “paradigms and contrasts” (2008: 68). Theory does not have to explain once and for all; it just has to facilitate productive conversations.

This vision of temporary models and productive conflict points to a dynamic, non-exhaustive core of a scholarly field. Several researchers envision such a core by providing more tempered alternatives to a unifying theory, which would still answer the need for common frameworks that would link researchers pursuing different projects. Fine borrows the term “organizing perspective” from sociology (Fine 2008: 14), while Bauman speaks of a “prevailing theory,” defined as “(1) a conceptual frame of reference (2) that guides a general, common engagement with a coherent intellectual program, (3) based on a set of premises about society

and culture, (4) providing an orienting framework for inquiry, and (5) derived from or aligned to a demonstrable intellectual tradition” (Bauman 2008: 29–30). An organizing perspective or a prevailing theory are not exhaustive frameworks for all inquiry in the field. They do, however, secure the advantages of having a general theoretical orientation, allowing for sustained conversations, a common frame of reference, a sense of the field’s intellectual heritage and a solid foundation for innovations (Bauman 2008: 35).

This discussion of the vagaries and possibilities of a folkloristic theory should have made clear that folklore study is not without theory. The issues brought up in the course of the debate within folkloristics have theoretical implications beyond the boundaries of the discipline. These insights would be useful to fields that have been shaped by grand theories, and indeed, to grand theories themselves, which often seek to break out of their own abstraction and disembodiment. Feminist, indigenous and postcolonial studies point out the limitations of Western explanatory frameworks. Even the undisputedly “grand” theoretical fields like psychoanalysis and deconstruction, which have been elevated and constrained by their own social capital in the academy, offer critiques of abstraction and mastery. Many contemporary thinkers push high theory in humbler directions: see, for example, Eve Sedgwick’s influential critique of the “paranoid” interpretive stance and her plea for “reparative reading” and “weak theory” (1997), and the various projects it influenced and inspired, including Kathleen Stewart’s contribution to the issue of the *Journal of Folklore Research* that I discussed in this section (2008). Theorizing “humble theory” is therefore the best theoretical move that folklore studies can make. It offers a path to forging continuous connections with other discipline in a clear-cut case of mutual enrichment.

Informed by this history of humble theorizing, my own approach to Vedic Wisdom relies on several key concepts in folklore study. Driven by self-reflexivity and openness to non-academic insights, folkloristics has usefully problematized its own key concepts: the folk and the lore. I draw on these discussions in the next few sections to identify alternative spirituality communities as the ambivalent folk and to define Vedic Wisdom as an ongoing vernacular belief tradition.

### **The folk of alternative spirituality: ethics and groups**

The “folk” in “folklore” forms the crux of the discipline’s defining debate. Folkloristics has historically focused on small or marginalized communities: whether advocating for them, fetishizing them, or reflecting on its relationship to them (Noyes 2016: 58). Because the discipline requires engagement both with other human subjects and with its own history of objectifying them, folkloristics is profoundly self-reflexive. In my project, such self-reflexivity is crucial, because the “folk” of the Vedic Wisdom tradition are ambivalently positioned as both marginalized and masterful.

Originally, the folk were conceived as village-dwelling bearers of authentic tradition, in contrast with people of higher classes or residents of cities (Hultkrantz

1960: 138). As the conditions of life rapidly changed and the discipline developed, folkloristics had to reconceive what it meant by the folk. Under the influence of Marxism, in particular the work of Antonio Gramsci, folklore was reconceptualized as the cultural expression of marginalized social groups (Gramsci 1999). In later scholarship, folklore became the expression of resistance of a small community to larger powers seeking to assimilate (Newall 1978), displace (Limón 1983, Tokarev 1985) and dominate it (Gudmundsson 2001).

Some folklorists came to celebrate folkloristics as the discipline of “subaltern forms” (Noyes 2016: 81), “the stigmatized vernacular” (Goldstein and Shuman 2012), and therefore of subaltern and stigmatized lives. John W. Roberts argues that the political and intellectual potential of folkloristics to “demystify structures that maintain marginality” should be developed further and become the basis for dialogue with other fields, especially those that have identity-based or emancipatory agendas, like ethnic studies and postcolonialism (2008: 52). Although folkloristics rarely produces explicitly radical rhetoric, it often takes a radical methodological approach, with many projects and concepts within the field produced in a process of critical self-reflection and even in collaboration with “people we used to call ‘the folk,’” (Briggs 2008: 92).

Concerns about an excessive emphasis on ethics of emancipation in scholarship have also been voiced. After all, folklorists who can see no fault with the people they study are in danger of mirroring the field’s original fetishism, erring this time on the side of idealizing the folk. In his polemical diagnosis of the state of the field, Elliott Oring describes such research as ethics-driven, arguing that folklorists should still prioritize inquiry-driven research (2006). Setting up this opposition, Oring refers back to folklore’s primary binary: he identifies the former approach with the folk: “people of a particular, and often marginalized, social class, occupation, religion, or ethnicity,” and the latter with the lore: “questions about tradition, transmission, artistic creativity, and identity” (Oring 2006: 205). Research, he argues, should not begin with a predetermined ethical lesson about marginalization. To put it simply, if we know in advance what we will find, we are not doing research. He advocates for a “folkloristics ... driven by questions: questions about history, art, culture, communication, and mind” (ibid. 209).

Oring’s argument is a self-consciously provocative and unapologetically conservative intervention, and one that must be understood in its North American academic context. I agree with Oring that an unexamined reproduction of predictable ethical statements can produce lazy research. I also appreciate his distinction between ethics and inquiry as a context-specific tool for illuminating the difficulties of critically reimagining the activity of research. At the same time, I am much less certain that it is possible to produce purely inquiry-based scholarship. Meanwhile, it is certainly possible to produce scholarship that is blind to its own ethical implications. For these reasons, I believe we cannot afford to dwell on the dichotomy for too long. Critical theory and emancipatory scholarship gave us the tools to analyze the hidden ethical and political stakes of arguments that present themselves as purely intellectual, and folklore studies highlighted the importance of recognizing that research must be comprehensive, pursuing questions about

“formal, thematic, and pragmatic” aspects of texts (Bauman 2008: 32) and combining functions of “the ethnographer, the practitioner, and the theorist” (Noyes 2016: 13). The process of profound and necessary rethinking of research ethics began in the last century and continued into the current one, and Oring’s article itself constitutes a contribution to this conversation.

Meanwhile, the tendency of folklore research to idealize the marginalized is indeed a problem: not only an intellectual one, as Oring argues, but also an ethical one. As postcolonial scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have shown, attempts to save the subaltern require the savior to speak for or over them (Spivak 1988). To rely on predetermined ethical answers is *both* bad scholarship and bad ethics. The study of the world of humans does not always have to be innovative and iconoclastic, but it has to strive towards meeting the world on its terms. This means noticing the nonobvious, articulating what has not yet been thought, and asking difficult questions about forms and ethics alike.

Nothing keeps a scholar on her toes as well as an ambivalent subject matter. Noyes describes the folk as “the intimate Other,” as distinct from the “radically alien” primitive subject constituted by anthropology: “The folk is all that is close and yet estranged: the servant class, the feminine, the domestic, the rural” (2016: 62–63). Noyes’s list evokes the 19<sup>th</sup> century context of the beginnings of the discipline, but it may be expanded indefinitely. The folk is essentially constituted anew in every scholarly project. The structural position of the folk does not always have to be imagined as subaltern; it is often simply uncomfortably Other. From the viewpoint of the scholar, alternative spirituality is both.

On the one hand, the focus on marginalized groups makes folkloristics an appropriate lens for studying alternative spirituality. Though not the vanishing tradition of the premodern folk, alternative spirituality is by definition not mainstream, often not official, and sometimes oppressed. On the other hand, alternative spirituality is not straightforwardly marginalized: it is often shaped by global tendencies, easily crosses over into the mainstream, and even generates its own patterns of oppression. I argue that this ambivalent relation to power makes alternative spirituality a useful object of study for folkloristics, precisely because it resists the discipline’s tendency to idealize its objects. Alternative spirituality usefully highlights the messy reality of social phenomena and does not allow us to fall into simplistic ethical claims.

How, then, can we conceptualize the folk of alternative spirituality without investing it with a preexisting aura of beleaguered authenticity?

To do so, I will turn to definitions of the folk that move away from connotations of subjugation or backwardness. Alan Dundes opened up the definition of a folk group to include “*any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor” (1965: 2). Dan Ben-Amos stripped the definition of folklore down to “artistic communication in small groups” (1971: 13). The key factor here is not tradition but relations: “for the folkloric act to happen,” people should “confront each other face to face and relate to each other directly” (Ben-Amos 1971: 13). With the advent of the digital age and the emergence of diffuse networks, this requirement of face-to-face interaction needed rethinking (Bronner 2012: 14).

Digital media connects people who have never met face to face and even those who are not in direct communication.

Individuals and groups that participate in the discourse of Vedic Wisdom cannot be easily identified with any of these definitions. Here we are dealing neither with peasant communities nor with small groups that always interact face-to-face. Identifying Vedic Wisdom followers and sympathizers as an exclusively online community would also be inaccurate. The alternative spirituality realm accommodates both cohesive groups, such as the community that emerged around the Child of Nature festival, as well as diffuse, temporary associations. These groups sometimes overlap, but that is not necessary. What unites them is a sense of commitment to or at least interest in Vedic Wisdom as spiritual truth, higher consciousness, and holistic lifestyle, towards which individuals can strive and which they may, with some effort, inhabit. Though the term has many different interpretations, it also provides possibilities of connection and communication. The social world of Vedic Wisdom thus embodies the duality at the heart of the word “group” that was identified by Dorothy Noyes. It is both “the empirical network of interactions in which culture is created and moves” and “the community of the social imaginary that occasionally emerges in performance” (2016: 21).<sup>18</sup> The Vedic Wisdom “folk group” is sometimes embodied in specific communities, other times it is represented or imagined.

Another pertinent definition was offered by Henry Glassie, who understood the folk group as “a human aggregate assembled by customary conduct” that is distinct from regulated and controlled communications of state powers or laws (1995: 401). Such a group is not idyllic or free from power struggle, but it is held together from within, not by external force: “[i]ts order derives from powers held among its members that remain theirs to enact, modify, or discard in the moment” (Glassie 1995: 401). In other words, the group is a network of power relations that appears as an alternative to official or state structures. Similarly, Richard Bauman proposed viewing the group as a “social matrix” of actors who are working out how to accomplish different ends, often through performance (Bauman 1972: 35). Bauman argued that folklore emerged in conflict or at least interaction between people belonging to different social categories.

In approaching Vedic Wisdom, I mobilize this understanding of the group as a site of ongoing negotiation of its meaning and redistribution of power. With several distinct self-identified Vedic traditions coming together in one term and sometimes in the physical spaces of festivals and interpersonal friendships, the Vedic Wisdom community is a priori that of negotiation, rather than unity. The folk of Vedic Wisdom can thus be seen as a set of loosely connected groups of people who receive and transmit a particular tradition, which is in turn loosely defined.

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<sup>18</sup> Noyes identified the group that emerges from pragmatic interaction as a “network”, the imagined group as a “community.” She also distinguished the “group” itself as at third related definition, defining it as an “institutionalized entity” (2016: 71).

## **The lore of alternative spirituality: tradition as process and product**

While folkloristics has valuable insights on the nature of human groups, its unique expertise involves not communities generally, as is the case with other social sciences, but what these communities create and transmit. Folklore scholars are concerned with “the life of forms in society”: their “transmission, performance, and differentiation” (Noyes 2016: 15). But while all folkloristics seeks to define, document and analyze tradition, there is still much variation in how tradition is understood within the field. Moreover, as Elliott Oring argues, this variety of definitions of tradition has been largely left unreflected. Oring shows that, at its base, the concept of tradition is split in two: it can mean both the process and the product of transmission (2012: 221). Seen through this lens, different approaches to tradition can be identified as process- or product-oriented, although most of them seek to synthesize the relationship between the two sides of the spectrum.

For Oring himself, the primary aspect of tradition is that it is a process of “cultural reproduction” (2012: 223). Similarly, Robert Georges and Michael Owen Jones define folklore as “continuities and consistencies through time and space in human knowledge, thought, belief, and feeling” (1999: 1). Richard Bauman draws attention to the duality of this process: “the dynamic tension between textual persistence or continuity – tradition – on the one hand, and textual change – variation or creativity – on the other” (Bauman 2008: 31). Several folklore scholars have argued that tradition incorporates both continuity and change. Tradition, they argue, is the flowing river that contains and enables human creativity (Glassie 1995, Jones 2000, Bronner 2011, Blank and Howard 2013). Following these scholars, I understand tradition as a dynamic process of doing things with the past, which involves both preservation and modification. These paradoxically intertwined impulses also shape the discursive node of Vedic Wisdom.

Vedic Wisdom, I argue, is a set of interlocking processes of inventing tradition. This does not, of course, mean that the contemporary Vedic Wisdom tradition is inconsequential or unreal. Tradition links us to the past but lives in the present, and if the Vedic Golden Age is perceived as real by its followers, their contemporary attempts to reinvigorate its Wisdom function as a tradition. Moreover, discourses of Vedic Wisdom are part of a different, more recent tradition – that of globalized alternative spirituality, which in turn has roots in Russian and Western esotericism, New Age and Hindu religious movements. Finally, contemporary discourses that make up Vedic Wisdom embody the mobile nature of tradition. As they continue to develop, they actively borrow from each other and also resurrect foreign ideas on a new soil.<sup>19</sup> Approaching Vedic Wisdom in this way allows me to problematize and analyze how this tradition of organizing one’s spiritual

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<sup>19</sup> If early folkloristics was interested in traditions rooted in particular location, in the twentieth century the discipline shifted to approaching tradition as a mobile phenomenon that spreads through migration (von Sydow 1948: 77).

search, practices, ideas, and ways of talking about spirituality has persisted in an ostensibly hostile environment of today's Russia.

If some definitions of folklore and tradition approach them as *processes*, others prioritize the *products* of those activities of transmission and modification. Products of a folklore tradition may also be understood in several ways: as texts, as practices or as performances. To put it simply, studying folklore as texts is the purview of literary-minded scholars, while researchers whose work is closer to anthropology focus on practices in community (Bronner 2016: 7). However, going beyond literary study, Bauman has argued for a wider conception of text as "a crafted, bounded, internally cohesive and coherent stretch of discourse" (Bauman 2008: 30). He points out that folklorists have both focused on cultural forms that already appear as text ("narratives, songs, proverbs, riddles, and the like") and "entextualize" those that do not ("custom," "belief," and "superstition" (Bauman 2008: 30). The developments of digital technology shifted the focus back to the "lore" part of the term "folklore": the process of transmission, the products that are being transmitted, such as memes or viral images, and the practices of digital culture that accompany this transmission.

There is, however, a parallel set of projects in folklore, which is focused on the workings of tradition in what people do, not what they say. In this project, I follow this approach, since my object is not authoritative texts but practices of belief. The practice-oriented strand in the discipline gives rise to scholarship that focuses on practice per se, which has been developed by continental European folklorists, and research on performance that flourished in American folkloristics (Glassie 1968: 5). Informed by the larger practice turn within several neighboring disciplines, practice-oriented scholars study how texts, language and customs work as part of daily life (Schatzki 2001). Their focus is on familiar actions that become meaningful as they are formalized and turn into tradition. Performance-focused approaches are similarly concerned with meaningful actions that are perceived as traditional, but they are more interested in the extraordinary aspects of lived life: the "singularity (and emergence) of an event" (Bronner 2012: 23).

The most obvious example of such a performance, and most relevant one for this project, is a festival. In my analysis I draw on Dorothy Noyes's approach to festivals as boundary-drawing events in "a larger society of complex linkages within which boundaries are regularly drawn and redrawn ... declaring difference between copresent individuals" (2016: 24). The Child of Nature festival, which I discuss in Article 1, brings together communities that emerge around different versions of Vedic Wisdom, and involves varied attempts at boundary-drawing. At the same time, the festival is a site for unexpected and uncontrolled expressions of creativity. It exhibits what Noyes described as "the tension of order and energy ... basic to all festival: a community requires both to prosper, but the balance between them is ever tenuous" (2016: 235).

Process- and product-oriented approaches to tradition are intertwined. Here, Roger Abrahams's definition of folklore is instructive. He saw folklore as a product of practice: "a series of artifacts which obey culture's general laws, those generated by the conflict of innovation and stability, and complicated by the interactions of

different groups” (1963, 98). Although Abrahams gives “artifacts” center stage, he defines them through their fraught conditions of production. The relationship between modification and preservation, “innovation and stability,” that constitutes culture is not predetermined. In every case, the precise relationship has to be discovered anew.

I want to underscore that interactions between groups involve not only negotiations of meaning and forms of a folklore tradition, but also of the power to produce and shape it. In the case of Vedic Wisdom, these processes of constructing, performing, negotiating, and modifying tradition can be usefully understood through the lens of vernacular belief.

### 3.2 Vernacular belief

In this project, I am interested in negotiations that occur within or between different communities of Vedic Wisdom, rather than authoritative texts or teachings that a particular movement uses to self-describe and institutionalize. Instead, I focus on lived religion, an approach that is in tune with the optics of folkloristics (Bowman 1992), and study Vedic Wisdom as vernacular belief.

The domain of unofficial or non-institutionalized religious life was initially referred to as “folk religion”. Leonard Primiano introduced the concept of vernacular religion as a replacement for this term (1995). He proposed the adjective “vernacular” as a way to break out of the existing opposition of the “official” and the “folk”, which, he argued, inadvertently reinforces the marginalization of unofficial beliefs and practices.<sup>20</sup> The term “vernacular,” by contrast, reflects people’s ability to draw on different resources and discourses to make sense of the world. Vernacular religion encompasses the multiplicity of localized forms that shape “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” (Primiano 1995: 44).

My research focuses on such localized forms of religious life within and between communities that value Vedic Wisdom. It is important to underscore that the many versions of Vedic Wisdom are no more “vernacular” than, say, the religious lives of Russian Orthodox believers. Primiano emphasizes that “[v]ernacular religion is not the dichotomous or dialectical partner of ‘institutional’ religious

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<sup>20</sup> James Kapaló argues that the term “folk religion” remains useful in contexts such as contemporary Europe, because it highlights ongoing conflicts around what can be understood as “real” religion (2013). Abandoning the term, he argues, “may inadvertently help to divorce the object of study from issues of national ideology, political and ecclesial power and the concerns of marginalised social, economic or ethno-linguistic groups” (ibid. 9–10). Kapaló’s argument concerns European countries with a Christian heritage, of which contemporary Russia is certainly an example. However, Vedic Wisdom is much too diverse and multicentric to be defined within that model; the Christian tradition does not fully determine the power relations within it. As a more general term, “vernacular belief” is more appropriate in this case. However, I agree with Kapaló’s argument, and make a similar point in my defense of the term “alternative spirituality.”

forms,” but rather “a theoretical definition of another term.” (Primiano 2012: 384). Since vernacularity refers to the lived experience of belief, all religion, whether more or less institutionalized, is vernacular as long as it is experienced (Primiano 2012: 384).

The need for this clarification stems partly from grammar: when we use “vernacular” as a modifying adjective, we inadvertently suggest the existence of religion proper: unmodified, non-vernacular. It might be clearer, if a lot more cumbersome, to speak not of “vernacular religion” but of “religion as a vernacular phenomenon.” The further confusion that scholars of vernacular religion are up against is the historical connotation of the term “vernacular” as the opposite of Latin, the language of power and the church. Thankfully, researchers of vernacular religion are not alone in having to resist these connotations.

In theorizing religion as lived, Primiano joins a line of scholars that used the term “vernacular” as a way to redefine architecture (Brunskill 1963), spoken language (Labov 2006) and activity outside of capitalist economy (Illich 1980) as self-sufficient and respectable, rather than backward or vanishing. As Dorothy Noyes explains, “this adjective was used to claim the autonomy, coherence, validity, and contemporaneity of practices hitherto defined in terms of lack (2016: 64). Crucially, vernacular practices were imagined as “developed in person-to-person interaction without the mediation of institutional codes or controls” (Noyes 2016: 64). Like Glassie’s folk groups (1995: 401), vernacular cultures are not free of power relations. They are, however, distinct from other domains of cultural life, because they are not managed vertically but rather emerge in interaction and conflict between their members.

In Primiano’s words, religious belief is “accomplished by the conscious and unconscious negotiations of and between believers” (1995: 44). Noyes identifies negotiation as a primary characteristic of vernacularity: “Rather than a stable layer [of marginalized or disappearing folklife as imagined in early conceptions within the discipline], the vernacular is now described as the immediate sphere of engagement in which actors negotiate between the tradition, professional, and alternative discourses available to them, drawing on multiple resources to create a practical repertoire” (2016: 66). Vernacular religion is therefore profoundly creative; “negotiations of belief and practice” can take the shape of “original invention, unintentional innovation, and intentional adaptation” (Primiano 1995: 43). What is more, it is the creative act of articulating and communicating that gives form to belief (Kivari 2012: 66).

The emphasis of negotiation in the theory of vernacular religion, in turn, implies ambivalence. If religion is the process of working out what religion is, it incorporates “dimensions of both confirmation and contestation, of legitimization of the hegemonic as well as resistance to such societal and cultural manifestations of power” (Primiano 2012: 387). Attention to the dynamics of vernacular belief is therefore crucial to understanding the workings of power in society beyond the binary of power and resistance (390). In my research on Vedic Wisdom, I show how the frame of vernacular belief can illuminate the ambivalent and multi-

directional power dynamics in the alternative spirituality milieu (Articles 1 and 2) and in Russian political culture (Article 4).

In the articles that make up this project, I approach the vernacular belief tradition of Vedic Wisdom with the help of other tools of folkloristics: namely, theories of the festival, genre and humor. My analysis of negotiations of truth at Child of Nature is informed by Beverly Stoeltje's and Dorothy Noyes's work on festivals (Stoeltje 1992, Noyes 2016). Following Ülo Valk in seeing vernacular belief as a generic practice, in which "verbal expressions of vernacular creativity follow certain patterns, devised by a multitude of earlier communicative acts and performances" (2014: 351), I examine the genres of personal stories, internet memes, and jokes in Articles 2, 3, and 4. In Article 2, I focus on the role of humor in maintaining and challenging the authority of certain beliefs and visions of Vedic Wisdom, drawing in particular on Elliott Oring's work on the diverse functions of humor, which may be both conservative and revolutionary (2004: 216–226), and Larry Danielson's work on the humor of religious groups (1986).

The folkloristic approach thus allows me to conceive of Vedic Wisdom as a tradition of vernacular belief and equips me with conceptual tools from scholarship on festivals, genre and humor. In addition, continuing the "boundary-crossing" strand in folklore studies (Briggs 2008: 96, Noyes 2016: 60), I make extensive use of insights from other disciplines.

### **3.3 Theories of legitimation, belonging and consumption**

In this project, I draw on scholarship from different disciplines that focuses on three problems in the field of alternative spirituality that pertain to my research of Vedic Wisdom: legitimation, individual choice and belonging, and consumption.

#### **Legitimation**

The question of how truth claims to are legitimized is central both to religious life and the study of religion. Forms of alternative spirituality make use of many forms of legitimation that exist in established religions, such as the appeal to tradition, personal experience and science (Hammer 2004). It would be nonsensical to say that legitimation in established world religions like Christianity is straightforward, but alternative spirituality poses the question of truth and legitimation with an even greater urgency. When it comes to building authority, non-mainstream religious movements face specific challenges.

To reflect the multiplicity of legitimation strategies used in the realm of new religiosity, James R. Lewis adapted Max Weber's classic tripartite model of types of legitimate authority – traditional, legal and charismatic (Weber 1978: 215) – into an elaborate taxonomy. Lewis organized types of legitimation into three broad groups: appeals to rationality (common sense or science), tradition, and charisma. The latter is a defining term for Lewis, since charisma can lend a "magnetic aura"

of authority not only to individuals, but also to science and tradition (Lewis 2010: 26).

Alternative movements often exist in hostile conditions and are not immediately accepted by wider societies, so it is especially important for them to develop robust legitimization as “an ideological resource” (Lewis 2003: 11). ISKCON, for example, was perceived in the United States as well as Russia as a new movement that was global rather than local. It was also seen as exhibiting textbook NRM features: “a charismatic founder, a membership initially composed almost entirely of converts, the post-charismatic sputtering of a series of poor leaders, and the social transformations of the past decades” (Zeller 2016: 72). To defend ISKCON against criticism and prove it to be a real, respectable religious movement, despite its exotic practices and tumultuous relationship to wider society in the West, devotees emphasize its origins in the venerable tradition of Chaitanya Vaishnavism (ibid. 72). Legitimation strategies such as this appeal to ancient wisdom serve new or relatively new movements in “making converts, maintaining followers, shaping public opinion, and appeasing government authorities,” while helping their leaders “justify their leadership positions to themselves” (Lewis 2003: 12).

In addition to external challenges to legitimacy, the realm of alternative spirituality contains internal ambivalences and complexities. Even those movements that contain strong critiques of established knowledge systems and emphasize their boundaries have to operate with an awareness of rival interpretations and within a larger milieu that is diverse and generally tolerant of that diversity. The need to emphasize exclusive access to truth with a recognition of the heterogeneity of the “holistic milieu” gives rise to the well-observed paradox of legitimization within popular alternative spirituality and New Age in particular. On the one hand, New Age discourse elevates the importance of experiencing the spiritual realm personally, rather than having one’s spirituality mediated by authoritative institutions (Heelas 1996, Campbell 2001: 79, Hammer 2004, Knoblauch 2008). On the other hand, new and alternative movements often invoke external authority as a source of wisdom and truth. This authority may be presented as traditional, even if it does not reflect actual continuity between ancient and contemporary beliefs (Hammer and Lewis 2007: 2, Partridge 2007: 247), or scientific, even when it is not recognized by mainstream scientific institutions (Kivari 2018: 130). Legitimizing strategies combine varied sources of authority with ease: dowsers, for example, rely on both magic and science in pursuit of knowledge about Earth’s energies (Kivari 2012: 66).

This question of negotiation leads us to the final complication in the process of legitimization in the alternative spirituality realm: who does the legitimizing? Though NRMs are often associated in the media with scandalous stories of toxic gurus, alternative spirituality usually proliferates in horizontal networks, where authority, and therefore the headache of needing to legitimate, is diffused. In this context, legitimization patterns are not necessarily weak; rather, they are “multi-layered and individualistic” (Uibu 2016: 57), specific to every community, movement and actor.

Legitimation in the alternative spirituality realm is therefore characterized by the need to compensate for the movements' perceived novelty, negotiations between claims to exclusive access to truth and universal vision of personal spirituality, and the role of individual leaders and horizontal networks in the heterogeneous and intertwined holistic milieu. All of this makes legitimation in the realm of alternative spirituality a fruitful direction for research.

### **Choice and Belonging**

People's spiritual lives have never been predictable or fully controlled by institutions: as Leonard Primiano reminds us, no doctrine, however authoritative, can reflect the individual and idiosyncratic processes of "creative religious negotiation" (2012: 389). What changed in the twentieth century, Primiano continues, is that these internal processes became more public (*ibid.* 389). While it may be too ambitious to speak of a radical change in people's spiritual creativity, in many countries there has certainly been a significant shift in religious culture.

The loose network of alternative spirituality that emerged as a result of rapid modernization challenges the idea that people have discrete and easily traceable religious affiliations. Contemporary spirituality seems to offer vaguer forms of involvement: "invisible religion" (Luckmann 1967), "belief without belonging" (Davie 1994), "low intensity religion" (Turner 2008) or "implicit religion" (Bailey 2010). Instead of stable membership in organized religious institutions, people in contemporary contexts of alternative spirituality tend towards "vague willingness" to consider spiritual dimensions to the world (Voas and Crockett 2005: 24), gradual involvement (Possamai 2000), "fuzzy fidelities" to certain spiritual ideas or paths (Voas 2009: 155), and religious "nomadism" (Hervieu-Léger 2001).<sup>21</sup> The object of my research, Vedic Wisdom, exists in this world of varying forms of identification and belonging.

This fluidity, in practice, looks like selective participation: people join religious groups and initiatives as need arises, or if the situation calls for it (Possamai 2000). Scholars are divided about how people make these decisions, and in general, how they organize their spiritual searches. Kelly Besecke ascribes a key role to "reflexive spirituality" as "a cultural language" (Besecke 2001), which allows people to consciously narrate their changing understandings of themselves and the spiritual. Arguing that this view may be too optimistic or rather, "over-intellectualist," Uibu suggests that "the spiritual milieu as such is practical in nature and usually not reflexive at all" (2016: 22). However, scholars on both sides of this debate agree that spirituality can be seen as a toolkit of resources that serve both philosophical (Besecke 2001) and practical purposes (O'Neil 2001: 456).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of new forms of spiritual belonging and practice, see Uibu 2016.

<sup>22</sup> These discussions draw on Ann Swidler's (1986) influential conceptualization of culture as a "tool-kit."

Indeed, as Uibu points out, even abstract spiritual teachings about the self and the universe often become useful in moments of concrete, specific need (2016: 10).

It is also important not to overemphasize the autonomy of individual spiritual searches. After all, personal spiritual journeys take place in communities, which necessarily have their own rules (Aupers and Houtman 2006), “implicit norms and value systems” (Uibu 2016: 47). In order to function socially, individuals inevitably enter into a relationship with the outside world and its hierarchies of authority (Heelas 1996: 213). People’s choices are limited by available options that are shaped by their environment and their personal ability to access different resources to understand and influence their conditions (Hervieu-Léger 2006: 61). Holding together the ideal of listening to one’s own spiritual self and the demands of living in a community requires a careful balancing act (Heelas 1996: 216).

The question of how individuals use their spiritual toolkits is addressed in studies of patterns of spiritual seekers’ involvement in different movements. Such patterns vary from life-changing commitments to casual spiritual tourism (MacKian 2012: 70). The picture is further complicated by the diversity of processes whereby people get involved in a particular path or in the milieu in general (Uibu 2016). The forms of Vedic Wisdom that I discuss in this project require different levels of belonging, and the people I interviewed negotiated those requirements in unique ways.

## Consumption

One notable feature of contemporary alternative spirituality practices is that they often go mainstream by being included into the market of self-development (Bruce 2000). The enmeshment of consumerism and spirituality is particularly glaring when it comes to New Age teachings that promise their followers prosperity through spiritual transformation. But even without explicit promises of material security or success, a spiritual movement may be using the markers of spirituality as “faith brands” (Einstein 2008: xi) to sell “the religious commodity” (Wallis 1988: 154). In the West, this has been the case with yoga and “Eastern” spirituality (Jain 2014), and most recently with the new wave of millennial witchcraft, which involves the use of crystals, Tarot card readings, and the reclaiming of the witch as a feminist figure.<sup>23</sup>

The ubiquity of such products led some scholars to compare the realm of alternative spirituality to a “spiritual service industry” (Bowman 1999: 188), or religiosity “à la carte” (Van Hove 1999). Indeed, at times the spiritual realm literally functions as a capitalist market, complete with large corporations, small independent businesses, seekers who act as entrepreneurs (Aupers and Houtman 2006) and those who act as consumers.

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Jaya Saxena and Jess Zimmerman’s 2017 *Basic Witches: How to Summon Success, Banish Drama, and Raise Hell with Your Coven*.

As defining aspects of social life, religion and economics have always been intertwined. Mara Einstein argues that marketing is not a contaminant of religious life but an important component (2008: 201). In any diverse society, religious institutions or movements compete for people's participation (Wilson 1999: 7). They must "respond to the demands of their actual and potential votaries" (Wilson 1999: 6) and strategically use "faith brands" "to aid consumers in making and maintaining a personal connection to a commodity product" (Einstein 2008: xi) through "devotional marketing" (Karapanagiotis 2018: 92). Spiritual communities, in other words, need marketing to be able to connect with seekers who may find meaning in their teachings. Their members seek to make money "for the temple" to ensure that their community or institution can continue functioning (Heelas 1999: 51).

Even so, contemporary alternative spirituality has a particular relation to the market, which is determined by the timing. Its rise overlapped with profound economic changes: the advent of consumer culture and the shift in many Western countries to neoliberal economic policy. In economics, neoliberalism refers to a type of structure in which the market is left to self-regulate without intervention. Today, the term "neoliberalism" was adopted in cultural theory to describe the ways in which culture and society are being shaped by this economic system.

Wendy Brown defines neoliberalism as "an order of normative reason" that "disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities" (2015: 30–31). As a result, the realm of business shapes social life, culture and even subjectivity. The neoliberal logic is not simply consumerism: it not only creates products but also consumers who use these products to reproduce themselves as "valuable subjects" (Skeggs 2004). Numerous examples of this pattern can be found in contexts of self-development: in Russian self-help literature for women (Salmenniemi and Adamson 2015), in the pickup artist community in London (O'Neill 2015), and among American fashion bloggers (Duffy and Hund 2015).

David Harvey and Fredric Jameson have shown that postmodernist culture readily overlaps with neoliberal structures (Harvey 1990, Jameson 1991). The same has been observed about contemporary spirituality (Huss 2014: 55). Like postmodernism, which has been hailed as radical in theory, art and literature, alternative spirituality appeared as a way out of the "grand narratives" of institutionalized religions. Like postmodernism, it turned out to be comfortable within the mainstream economic logic.

This alignment of alternative spirituality and the neoliberal economic logic is not surprising, given that they share at least the values of "pluralism, individualism, and freedom of choice" (McGuire 2008: 194). New Age in particular, with its freedom of choice and ethic of self-empowerment, is often linked to late capitalism and the market economy (Heelas 1999, Hanegraaff 2007: 47, Possamai 2007: 151). Huss points out a demographic overlap between New Age seekers and those who embrace neoliberal ideology: Western middle and upper classes (2014: 57).

Many scholars have voiced concerns about what this prevalence of market logic means for contemporary religion (Cimino and Lattin 1998, Roof 1999, Miller

2004, Carrette and King 2005, Gauthier and Martikainen 2013). Some argue that the market logic hollows out spiritual teachings, turning them into “cheap, lightweight product” (Bruce 2000: 234). “Self-spirituality,” which reorients seekers towards the improvement of personal life (Heelas 1996: 2), can substitute temporary or pragmatic solutions to life’s mundane problems for contemplating deeper existential issues (Clarke 1988: 151; Kraft 2014: 306).

Some point out that the model of the authentic self that is the source of wisdom and holiness, common in some strands of alternative spirituality,<sup>24</sup> uncomfortably folds into the model of human capital. Individuals employ spiritual techniques to work on themselves in order to become more enlightened, more successful, more self-actualized – in other words, to improve their standing as human capital. The ideal neoliberal subject takes responsibility for itself and aims “to strengthen its competitive positioning and appreciate its value” (Brown 2015: 33). Both the New Age valorization of the self and the neoliberal requirement that humans turn themselves into capital divert attention from social inequalities (Heelas 1996, Carrette and King 2005: 5–6) and place the responsibility for failure or misfortune solely on the individual (Brown 2015: 132). Meanwhile, this arrangement allows large corporations to derive value from people’s spiritual needs (Carrette and King 2005: 2, Einstein 2008: 65). For these reasons, some critics have seen alternative movements as too accommodationist, “not troubling enough” (Carrette and King 2005: 5) of larger structures that should perhaps be troubled.

Warnings about mixing spirituality and economics have themselves been the subject of critique. Boaz Huss argued that scholars who express such anxieties are unwilling to let go of the notion of a true spirituality that is uncontaminated by materialism (2014: 58). Meanwhile, he argues, contemporary spirituality challenges the opposition between religious and secular realms, and it must be acknowledged as such. Huss recognizes “ideological commonalities” between the New Age and neoliberalism, but resists the notion “that New Age spirituality should be identified as a disguised neo-liberal ideology” (2014: 57). Huss enlists as evidence the fact that “people who engage in New Age practices do not necessarily accept neo-liberal values” (ibid. 57).

Huss’s argument that critiques of spiritual consumerism rely on an implicit ideal of “true spirituality” is apt; however, his distinction between contemporary spirituality and neoliberalism may be too hasty. Referring to neoliberalism as an “ideology,” Huss emphasizes its existence as a set of *ideas*, rather than as a structuring logic that contains ideas and determines how they are expressed. But the question of whether certain ideas are expressed in a particular teaching, and which categories of people embrace them, is not the only question at stake.

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<sup>24</sup> Even Michel Foucault fired a shot at “the Californian cult of the self, [in which] one is supposed to discover one’s true self, to separate it from that which might obscure or alienate it, to decipher its truth thanks to psychological or psychoanalytic science, which is supposed to be able to tell you what your true self is” (1997: 271). In this comment, Foucault sought to disavow any associations between the care of the self and what he saw as self-indulgence under the guise of spirituality.

In fact, the broader and more pressing problem with which neoliberalism presents the scholar of alternative spirituality is not that it turns spirituality materialistic, but that it shapes the practice of spirituality, alongside other cultural practices. Spirituality is tied to participation in the market in multiple ways, which can have ambivalent effects.

For individuals, the spiritual market itself may be enabling as well as corrosive. The “suppliers” of the spiritual market do not necessarily take advantage of people: as Bowman points out, market relations often go both ways: the sellers are also their neighbors’ customers (2013: 270). People can find meaning and have profound experiences in a consumerist culture, “just as they have in other societies” (Gauthier and Martikainen 2013: xv).<sup>25</sup> Moreover, as Huss points out, contemporary alternative spirituality preserves countercultural potential (2014: 57), which can help carve out different ways of being and relating to the world that exceed the neoliberal structures.

The market logic in itself does not prevent spirituality from offering individual meaning and effect social change. It does, however, shape spirituality in specific ways, which must be examined. How do economic and technological factors shape how people experience and practice alternative spirituality? In my research, I take up this question in relation to Vedic Wisdom.

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<sup>25</sup> For a review of scholarship on religion in consumer societies, see Gauthier, Martikainen and Woodhead 2011.

## 4. VEDIC WISDOM

Based on my fieldwork online and offline, I have produced four case studies that engage specific aspects of Vedic Wisdom and respond to my research questions in different ways. In the following section, I will provide some general findings that address each question more explicitly than I have in the articles.

### 4.1. What can be understood as Vedic Wisdom in contemporary Russia?

The concept of Vedic Wisdom, which provides the framework for my investigation of contemporary Russian alternative spirituality, is highly intertextual and global, but also charged with local meanings. Coming from heterogeneous sources, it forms a powerful discourse in Russian alternative spirituality. The three interpretations of Vedic Wisdom discussed in this section emerge from my engagement in the field. They have been discussed separately by scholars of specific movements, and I refer to their work in introducing each one.

The three main strands of Vedic Wisdom refer to the Indian Vedas, to Russia's pre-Christian past, and to a source of spiritual potential and knowledge that is not clearly defined. The word "Vedic" can refer to any or all of these meanings at once, as well as be invested with additional ones. Its precise connotations depend on the context. The correct interpretation of Vedic Wisdom is contested by Slavic- and Hindu-based spiritual groups, especially those who, like ISKCON or specific Rodnoverie communities, feel strongly about setting boundaries as to what Vedic Wisdom actually is. Some people, however, are happy with this multiplicity of meanings.

Beliefs commonly associated with Vedic Wisdom include the following:

1. The modern world is profoundly flawed, ridden by materialism, alienation, and spiritual and ecological degradation.
2. The Golden Age happened in the (Vedic) past.
3. Ancient wisdom must be recovered from underneath "official" history, by turning to the alternative genealogy of knowledge or conducting independent theorizing or research.
4. People need to embrace a Vedic lifestyle of inner growth and harmony with nature and the divine: e.g. by adopting specific spiritual practices, becoming a vegetarian, moving to an ecovillage, acting in accordance with traditional gender norms etc.
5. Choosing a Vedic lifestyle will improve things for the individual, who may find spiritual meaning, unity with the divine, family happiness and material comfort, and/or for all people and the Earth, which will enter a new Golden Age.

Many ideas associated with Vedic Wisdom in Russia are identifiable as aspects of New Age discourse, but some clash with the more liberal tendencies of Western New Age. Shaped by socially conservative movements such as ISKCON's Vaishnava tradition or Russian Native Faith, Vedic Wisdom tends to include patriarchal and traditionalist elements.

There is also much internal division within the movements that advance their versions of Vedic Wisdom. Russian Paganism is heterogeneous in teachings and practice. Ecovillagers who follow the ideas from Vladimir Megre's books disagree about their infallibility. Vaishnava communities face internal conflicts of interpretation and external threats to doctrinal purity from popular interpretations of ISKCON ideals. In practice the boundaries between these groups are often vague, and individuals move between them as their interests change and their spiritual searches continue. Keeping this heterogeneity in mind, we can nevertheless see these movements as recognizable discursive communities that share practices, imagery and central ideas.

## **Vedic India**

Globally, Vedic Wisdom is often associated with Indian or Indian-inspired movements and practices. In Russian society at large, Hindu spirituality is often perceived as foreign, but it also has the exotic appeal of the East and a strong legitimating authority. Moreover, it has a long history in the country.

Trade routes have linked the Volga with the Indian subcontinent since the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Kotin 2020: 1). By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was an established Indian diaspora in Astrakhan, and in 1722, Peter the Great passed legislation to protect the freedom of Astrakhan Hindus to practice their religion (Kotin 2020: 3). A century later, trade with India had declined and Astrakhan Indians assimilated with the locals. By then, however, there was a rising cultural fascination with India itself, aided by publications of Nikolai Novikov's 1788 translation of the Bhagavad Gita and Gerasim Lebedev's 1817 travelogue *An Impartial Contemplation of the East Indian Brahmanical Systems of Sacred Rites and Customs* (Kotin 2020: 10–11). These early texts gave rise to Russian Indology.

India has also been important in fin-de-siècle Russian esotericism and culture at large, notably in the spiritual writings of the Roerichs and Helena Blavatsky (Shakhmatova 2009: 78, Ivanov and Fotieva 2016). The beginning the 20<sup>th</sup> century also saw an upsurge in interest in yoga, a fascination that was rekindled in the 1960s. As a result of this history, it is not the early pragmatic intercultural links of trade and migration, but rather the rediscovered imaginary East that shaped how Indian spirituality has been received in Russian culture. This history arguably made it easier for Hindu-based movements to take root in Russia, but also made them more conducive to local adaptation. In Article 3, I discuss the vagaries of this process.

In Russia, the concept of specifically “Vedic,” as opposed to, say, “Eastern” or “yogic,” Wisdom is associated with the International Society of Krishna Con-

sciousness. As its name suggests, ISKCON is an international movement centered around the worship of Krishna, seen as the main manifestations of Vishnu. ISKCON is a missionary movement of Chaitanya, or Gaudiya Vaishnavism, a monotheistic tradition with roots in 16<sup>th</sup> century Bengal (Delmonico 2004: 31–34). The founder of ISKCON, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977), a Calcutta native, famously travelled to the United States of America in 1965, where he began preaching devotion to Krishna to hippies in Central Park (Rochford 2007: 12). Through its many missions around the world, ISKCON actively promotes Prabhupada’s interpretation of Vedic scriptures, specifically the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, and the Bhagavata Purana, which are seen as the ultimate authority on the nature of God, humanity and the world. ISKCON worship includes traditional Hindu practices: conducting rituals, chanting mantra, offering blessed food, or *prasadam*, as well as serving free meals or selling books. The most well-known of these practices is sankirtan – singing praises to Krishna and dancing in the streets. Because it was new to the West and perceived as exotic, ISKCON is often cited as an example of a New Religious Movement. However, as scholars like Larry D. Shinn (1987) and Benjamin Zeller (2016) point out, ISKCON has roots in a long-standing tradition, which has been transformed in an international context. To use Roy Wallis’s terms (2003), the American ISKCON movement started out with world-renouncing attempts to replicate a premodern social system in contemporary society. It later experienced institutional crises, which spurred on anti-cultist attacks, and eventually transitioned to a more “world-accommodating” orientation (Rochford 2007).

The movement arrived in the Soviet Union in the seventies, after Prabhupada visited Moscow in 1971 and met a man named Anatoly Pinyaev (Anantashanti prabhu), who became a devoted follower (Dudarenok 2004). The lively underground scene of alternative spirituality was receptive to ideas from India. By the 1980s, however, the Soviet state identified ISKCON as a Western threat (Kotin 2020: 15). Early adherents were persecuted, harassed and incarcerated along with other undesirables, but despite these difficulties, the movement grew (Pranskevičiūtė and Juras 2014). As Vladimir Kritsky (Vishvamitra das) reflects in his memories of ISKCON in USSR, persecution resulted in stronger devotion and sometimes opportunities for missionary work in prison (Kritsky 2014). In 1988, ISKCON was the first new religious movement in Russia to be officially registered (Kotin 2020: 15).<sup>26</sup>

In post-Soviet Russia, as in other countries, ISKCON has cooperated with the Indian diaspora: notably, in the ambitious project of building a Vedic center in Moscow which had to be scaled down because of resistance from Orthodox activists (Kotin 2020: 2). In the Russian context, ISKCON has often been at the center of controversies and the object of accusations in antisocial and extremist activity. Notable examples are the much-publicized court cases concerning the content of the Bhagavad Gita (2011–12) and alleged “unlawful missionary activity” of yoga teacher Dmitry Ugay (2016) (Kotin 2020: 2).

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<sup>26</sup> For an in-depth study of Russian Vaishnavism, see Ivanenko 2008.

Russian followers of Indian-based religions, primarily ISKCON, are known in Indian media as “Slavic Hindus” (Kotin 2020: 17). The “Slavic Hindu” community is diverse, including not only ISKCON but other Hindu-based movements that recently arrived in Russia, such as Gaudiya Matha, as well as Russians who do not identify with Hinduism but express strong interest in the tradition. Still, ISKCON is by far the largest and most influential. It has been a notable presence in the Russian cultic milieu and grew to be a cultural force beyond it. Lecturers that came out of the ISKCON community, such as Oleg Gadetsky, Ruslan Narushevich, Marina Targakova, Oleg Torsunov, and others, brought the ISKCON vision of Vedic Wisdom to much broader audiences in Russia, shaping what came to be known as Vedic psychology. This process of diffusion of beliefs also created new challenges of negotiation, adaptation, creative interpretation and conflict over authority and truth.

### **Vedic Rus’**

The third major connotation of Vedic Wisdom has a Slavic flavor. Although the use of the term “Vedic” in reference to a Slavic tradition may seem unusual to the Western ear, in Russian spiritual circles it is quite common. Sometimes it appears as the term “Vedrussian.” The idea of Vedic Rus’ is associated with the varieties of Rodnoverie and other versions of Russia’s Neo-Paganism, as well as other ideas and practices that place importance on tradition, such as the Ringing Cedars of Russia movement.

The word “Rus” – the name of the medieval state on the current territory of Russia – refers to Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, three countries seen as having common spiritual roots. South and Central Slavic nations are usually absent from the picture, although they may be included in more universal visions of Vedic history. In the designation of Rus’ as Vedic, what comes into play is the idea of a common homeland of the Indo-European peoples, frequently located on the territory of Russia (Strmiska 2005: 23). The idea emerged from research into Slavic history that was supported by the Soviet government in the 1930s (Laruelle 2012: 295). Although this idea remains a theory, it built on and has been popularized by Russian amateur historians and writers (Laruelle 2008: 291). The theory is sometimes linked to the Book of Vles, a manuscript of purportedly ancient origin that tells the pre-history of Slavic tribes.

In such accounts, Russia’s Vedic past is usually described as a Golden Age, where people possessed perfect health and supernatural abilities. Language itself was a repository of wisdom: the word “Vedic,” for example, is commonly derived from the Russian word *vedat’* – ‘to know’. As this etymology suggests, it is common to hear that Vedic Wisdom is about knowledge, rather than belief: knowledge that is believed to have ancient roots and be more profound than what is perceived as surface-level “belief.” A striking example of this interest in language is the VseYaSvetnaya Gramota theory, which posits that the alphabet contains coded messages (Tambovtseva 2019).

Many Pagans in Russia have an interest in Indian spirituality, regarding “modern Indians as their long-lost cousins and ... the religion of Hinduism as their oldest spiritual relative” (Strmiska 2005: 27–28). Early ideas about Slavic ethnic spirituality often involved an interest in Indian wisdom. The Book of Vles has been published as the Russian Vedas (see Asov 1992). Today, Rodlubie, a significant branch of Rodnoverie, embraces the connection with India, in part by positing an equivalence between Rodlubie chants and Indian mantras. For others, however, the distinction between Russian or Slavic Vedic spirituality and its Indian varieties is a very salient one. Some Rodnoverie adherents see this closeness to Hinduism as ignorance of the native tradition (Aitamurto 2011: 25).

Today, the term “Vedism” is sometimes associated with nationalist and conservative groups, and for a good reason: some of the most famous extremist and racist writings of the post-Soviet era are Aleksandr Khinevich’s *Slavic-Aryan Vedas (Slaviano-Ariiskii Vedy)* (Dorofeev 2011). However, the discourse of Russian or Slavic Vedic Wisdom is popular well beyond the boundaries of radical groups, perhaps because it helps address the post-Soviet identity crisis by providing “a comforting historical imagination” (Laruelle 2008: 298). One example of such Vedic Wisdom that is free of explicit ideologies of racial superiority and has broader ties to the general New Age milieu is the Ringing Cedars of Russia, or the Anastasia movement. While more radical interpretations of Vedic Wisdom maintain stronger boundaries, the Ringing Cedars followers participate actively in the shared milieu of Vedic Wisdom. For this reason, I focus on this movement in both this introduction and two of my articles.

Vladimir Megre’s bestselling series *The Ringing Cedars of Russia* (1996–2010) is close in spirit to the universalist environmentalism of Western forms of eco-spirituality. At the same time, though most concepts in Megre’s books may have predecessors in the Western New Age, they are reworked by giving them a Russian spin (Andreeva 2018: 104). Megre wrote the books as an account of his encounters with Anastasia, a young woman who lived in the Siberian forests, outside the Weberian “iron cage” of modern civilization (Weber 2001). This unusual upbringing allowed her to preserve extraordinary spiritual insight and abilities that could be seen as paranormal, but which the books claim to be consistent with primordial human nature. In the course of the series, Anastasia shares with Megre and his readers her vision of life, history and mankind’s ultimate salvation, locating it in the restoration of the Vedrussian civilization, humanity’s Golden Age.

Anastasia’s vision can be summed up as follows: as God’s creative projects, we were meant to become independent and help Him perfect his Creation in peace and joy. For this reason, humans are capable of altering reality with the power of thought. The technocratic civilization has hindered this process, plunging people into misery. To recover the lost state of harmony and save the world from destruction, people need to establish sustainable personal estates (Kin’s Domains – *rodoye pomest’ia*) to build a new life of higher consciousness for themselves and future generations. The movement’s name, The Ringing Cedars of Russia, comes from the important spiritual role that cedars play in Anastasia’s philosophy:

they possess healing powers and can transmit wisdom and positive energy to humans.

Anastasia's "Vedrussian" wisdom both deflects and invites an association with Russianness. In other words, her vision is universal but has recognizably Russian features (Tsiv'ian 2007). Her birthplace, the taiga, invokes a long cultural tradition that sees Siberia as both a source of exotic wonders and the location of "unspoiled" Russianness (Slezkine and Diment 1993: 2, 6). The Golden Age, as described by Anastasia, took place on the whole of Earth, but lasted the longest on the territory of Russia. In practice, despite this focus on Russia, the Ringing Cedars movement is ethnically diverse and international (Andreeva and Pranskevičiūtė 2010), and the main focus of Megre's books is not national identity but a way of life. People are encouraged to venerate and recover traditions in general, not just the Russian one (Andreeva 2017: 12). The movement's aesthetics, however, continue to be influenced by an imagined Slavic Russian past.<sup>27</sup>

The Ringing Cedars of Russia movement has flourished on Russia's New Age scene since the mid-nineties. Altogether Megre has written ten books, which have sold 11 million copies and have been translated into 23 languages ("Biography" 2020). He has also established the Anastasia Foundation for the Support of Culture and Creativity. Megre maintains an official website, Anastasia.ru, and speaks extensively at readers' conferences. According to the movement's official website, there are now 389 registered Anastasia ecovillages in Russia, and 133 ecovillages in Europe and America ("List of ecovillages" 2020). Although, as Rasa Pranskevičiūtė points out, the number of successful settlements is uncertain (2014: 5), the influence of Anastasia's ideas in the post-Soviet region is reflected in the unfailing activity of Megre's readers. They continue to establish Kin's Domains and connect with each other at meetups, workshops, festivals and concerts. They create books, magazines, art, music, blogs, how-to videos on sustainable living and documentaries about ecovillage life. The movement also has a strong commercial component, with sales of cedar products, handmade items, books and other related merchandise, both on the official website and from many independent sources. In 2013, it registered a political party Rodnaia Partiiia (Kin's Party),<sup>28</sup> whose agenda is limited to promoting legislation that would provide people with easy access to land.

The Ringing Cedars movement exhibits elements of counterculture, as it offers people an alternative to mainstream lifestyle choices and religious affiliations. The drastic lifestyle changes made by some of the books' readers give rise to accusations of fanaticism, intolerance and even brainwashing. Moreover, the books are often overtly critical of the Orthodox Church and have conspiriological

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<sup>27</sup> Pranskevičiūtė notes that the role of the nation differs across Ringing Cedars communities, and Russian Anastasians tend to be more patriotic than their Lithuanian counterparts (2011: 127).

<sup>28</sup> See the Party's page on the Ministry of Justice website: <http://minjust.ru/ru/taxonomy/term/267>. All websites accessed on April 30, 2020 if not indicated otherwise.

elements: for example, they posit the existence of a secret caste of priests that has orchestrated the world's decline.

At the same time, Ringing Cedars is not that extraordinary in its context. Elements of conspiracy theory are common in contemporary Russian culture, and the movement's socially conservative values align with the Orthodox ones. Most importantly, the movement does not advocate a hostile attitude to the world outside the community. Neither is it ethnically exclusive: as noted above, despite being steeped in visions of Russia's spiritual Golden Age, Megre's books inspire and welcome non-Russian followers (Andreeva and Pranskevičiūtė 2010).

Though Megre remains involved in the movement and continues to publish, his role is not that of an infallible charismatic leader. The Ringing Cedars is not centralized or even ideologically uniform: though many readers agree on the importance of the books' ideas, opinions differ as to their application and even their correctness (Andreeva 2018: 90). This relative freedom of interpretation naturally gives rise to explicit conflicts over which groups or persons have the power to decide how the books' central ideas should be interpreted or implemented. I tackle the role of humor in these negotiations in Article 2. Finally, in Article 4, I analyze the way Anastasia's teachings are put to work in a digital context, producing unusual forms of political engagement. The article focuses on memes of Vladimir Putin that neither celebrate nor critique the president, but rather aim to visualize and thus bring about a desired future.

## **Vedic psychology**

Vedic psychology – *vedicheskaia psikhologiia* – is the most widely known version of Vedic Wisdom in Russia. An average internet user with an interest in self-development is more likely to have heard of it than of the other movements I discuss, and a foreigner familiar with other versions of Vedic Wisdom is equally likely to be confused by it. The discourse of Vedic psychology is backed by hundreds of hours of lectures, dozens of books and other content produced by several minor celebrities who share their expertise through online seminars and tours around the country and the near abroad.

Vedic psychology has origins in ISKCON, but its purview is broader. The established ISKCON tradition encountered in Russia a number of enthusiastic listeners with varied ideas about tradition and spiritual authority. As spiritual ideas moved from the narrow circles of devotees into the bookshop aisles of popular psychology, they transformed. In this process, beliefs and ideas from Prabhupada were contextualized in a new environment, undergoing yet another stage of interpretation and localization.

Instead of devotion to the divinity or liberation from spiritual attachments, Vedic psychology is usually focused on more mundane matters: lifestyle adjustments, self-improvement and, crucially, gender prescriptiveness. Vedic psychology promotes not only the idea that gender is an essential and stable category, but that learning to act as a proper man or woman could solve many, if not all,

personal and social problems. These teachings form their own, most popular, subsection of Vedic psychology, usually referred to as Vedic Femininity (*vedicheskaiia zhenstvinnost*).

Vedic Femininity is promoted by a specific group of lecturers, bloggers, influencers and even fashion designers. One example is Olga Valyaeva, a blogger with 438,000 Instagram followers.<sup>29</sup> Valyaeva is an author of 22 books whose target audience includes unmarried and married women in their twenties and thirties. Oleg Torsunov, whose work I discuss in more detail in Article 3, is less popular on Instagram, but has a more diverse audience in terms of gender and age, reflecting the thematic breadth of his lectures on lifestyle and the meaning of life. His lectures on Vedic Femininity appeared in the late 2000s and made him a foundational figure in this field. Torsunov, Valyaeva and other well-known “Vedic” lecturers are Krishna devotees, but the appeal of this type of teaching extends to audiences who do not identify as Vaishnavas or even as religious people. Additionally, Slavic-inspired spiritual communities were inspired to develop their own versions of Vedic Femininity. For example, Veledar Nevo-gradsky offers “64 arts that men and women need to achieve perfection,” and the VK group “Ya-Slavianka” (“I am a Slavic Woman”) regularly posts tips for becoming and remaining properly feminine. While the aesthetics of these articles may be different from those offered by the original Vedic psychology lecturers, the teachings themselves are fairly uniform.

Overwhelmingly directed at and popular with women, Vedic femininity teachings encourage them to be submissive in order to achieve personal happiness, economic security and spiritual enlightenment. According to a checklist drawn from Torsunov’s lectures and circulated on Russian social networks, often without attribution, a proper woman must commit herself to her family, respect, admire and obey her man, organize and perform domestic tasks, be faithful and sexy, wear jewelry and long skirts, and eat sweets to cultivate cheerfulness. Meanwhile, the man is expected to take the lead within the family and maintain relationships with people outside it, understand the meaning of life and find a job according to his nature. He must make money to expand the domestic space and provide his wife with jewelry, clothes, and sweets (Oblacco 2012).

These commandments conform to existing patriarchal stereotypes widely accepted in Russian society, making Vedic Femininity seem like a natural and even patriotic choice. The rhetoric of family values has been used by the state to address Russia’s demographic crisis and give ideological backing to the country’s opposition to the West (Riabova and Riabov 2017). At the same time, this discourse is not uniquely Russian: it builds on misogynist tendencies historically present both in the ISKCON movement (Lorenz 2004)<sup>30</sup> and in American self-help (Zimmerman et al. 2007). Vedic psychology lecturers and several women I spoke with who pursued Vedic Femininity regularly reference Western popular

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<sup>29</sup> As of 14 April 2020.

<sup>30</sup> In a quantitative analysis of Prabhupada’s writings, Ekkehard Lorenz showed that 80% of all statements regarding women were negative (2004: 122).

psychology. John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992) is a reference point for Ruslan Narushevich, and Torsunov's Veda-Radio website regularly features an excerpt from *The Power of a Praying Wife* (1997) by American Christian writer Stormie Omartian. Evangelical Christianity may be a strange bedfellow to this popular psychology offshoot of Russian Hinduism, but the ideological affinities, such as the emphasis on family values and individual responsibility, ensure that the borrowing does not seem out of place.

In my fieldwork in St Petersburg, I encountered many women who were interested in Vedic Femininity. They worked towards this goal by listening to lectures, reading articles, attending seminars, as well as inspiring and disciplining each other on their journeys. Some of these women, just like Valyaeva, developed their skills at inspirational writing into online businesses, selling books and conducting paid seminars. Others became Krishna devotees. Many combined Vedic Femininity with individual takes on spirituality, even, in some cases, light versions of Russian Orthodoxy. Some abandoned and even rejected Vedic Femininity altogether, turning to critiques of these ideas produced by feminist and feminist-minded bloggers such as Evgeniya Zadrutskaya (2015) and journalists in mainstream publications like *Cosmopolitan* (Gribatskaya 2015). In response to criticism, Vedic Femininity bloggers have had to readjust their approach. Valyaeva, for example, has acknowledged that the pursuit of femininity can become an unhealthy obsession (2015).

The development of popular Vedic psychology did not leave committed ISKCON members indifferent. Some devotees look upon it benevolently, celebrating its potential to turn people's attention to Vedic wisdom and even to Krishna, while others were concerned about this bastardization of belief. A series of scandals surrounding Vedic psychology lecturers like Oleg Torsunov and Leonid Tugutov reflect the charged atmosphere surrounding this phenomenon. In Article 3, I analyze the conflicts surrounding Torsunov's adaptation of ISKCON's version of Vedic wisdom in the Russian context as a process of negotiating belief and contesting legitimation.

This process of transformation and contextualization of Hindu-based Vedic teachings can be seen through the prism of genre as an aspect of belief (Valk 2014: 351). What we see in the transition from ISKCON's Vedic Wisdom to non-denominational Vedic psychology is, among other things, a change in the generic expression of belief. Initially, the sacred texts of the Vedic tradition develop into the teachings of gurus, of which Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the ISKCON movement, is the first. In the Russian context, belief is transformed again, this time into the self-help discourse of bloggers and lecturers, the new bearers of this hybrid tradition.

## **4.2 How do discourses of Vedic Wisdom interact with each other and negotiate divergent claims?**

The construction, negotiation and legitimation of particular versions of Vedic Wisdoms takes place in a plural landscape. They exert mutual influence, in intense but bounded interactions such as a festival and in individual lives and relationships as they unfold over time. The multivalent discursive cluster of Vedic Wisdom operates in a wider context of universalism of New Age, but some versions of it are tied to movements with stronger claims to exclusivity. Some spiritual paths, such as, for example, ISKCON, require serious dedication, and their adherents object to being grouped together with unrelated, if similarly alternative, movements. Nevertheless, as Kathryn Rountree points out, even strongly defined movements such as Pagan ones function in a globalized and multicultural context where ideas are exchanged (Rountree 2015: 7).

As an aspect of alternative spirituality, Vedic Wisdom embodies a counter-intuitive balance between two extremes: the fluidity and multiplicity of interpretations and the strong legitimation base that it provides for specific beliefs and truth claims. The finding is unsurprising to any researcher or practitioner of New Age spirituality: strong claims can and do coexist with openness and fluidity. How precisely this balance is maintained depends on the context. Faced with spiritual pluralism in action, advocates of different Vedic Wisdoms use different strategies to deal with rival interpretations: legitimation and delegitimation, negotiation, and individual skills of spiritual intelligence.

### **Legitimation and delegitimation**

The alternative spirituality milieu is characterized by a paradoxical combination of diversity, which enables it to function as a market, and the belief in a singular universal truth. Truth in many movements is located in the self, yet it is often supported by references to something outside the self – tradition. A product of globalized postmodernity, alternative spirituality nevertheless creates an atmosphere conducive to antimodern attitudes, totalizing narratives and exclusive authority claims. As a result, the spiritual milieu may be seen as a space of competition between particular and often elaborate visions of truth. In this context, legitimation becomes a key objective for spiritual actors.

James R. Lewis viewed legitimation strategies as tools that “emerge more or less spontaneously out of the ongoing life of the community” (2010: 25). People do not use these techniques consciously. Rhetorical strategies for justifying narratives of belief, whether claims about the nature of the spiritual or legends, are acquired in practice, in the process of socialization in the community (Oring

2008: 130).<sup>31</sup> In a community that is as heterogeneous as alternative spirituality, legitimation strategies are flexible and diverse.

In my fieldwork, I discovered that legitimation of Vedic Wisdom in daily conversations occurred not only through references to authoritative scriptures or individuals, which would have been my natural assumption, but through instructive personal stories and jokes. These stories are often told in conversations between friends, invoked in response to events in their personal lives. Some stories were adaptations of narratives from the “official” literature of any version of Vedic Wisdom or other esoteric writings. With their religious meaning often downplayed, these stories are valued for their everyday wisdom and usefulness for building a happy life. One example is “The Goddess Wife” (“Zhena-Boginya”), a popular story from Megre’s *Ringing Cedars of Russia*, which features a husband who was able to improve his relationship with his wife by treating her with love and admiration. The story was told or referred to in person during my fieldwork. It has also been adapted into a skit performed at festivals (Belogortseva 2016) and inspired an almanac with the same name (Kiseleva 2013).

Other stories were personal memories or gossip transformed into parables with the help of explanatory frames borrowed from the teaching. Infused with spiritual meaning, these stories functioned as warnings or confirmations of the truth and power of Vedic Wisdom prescriptions. Positive stories are more popular; they are told to encourage the listeners to believe that the Vedic method does indeed work. Olga Valyaeva’s narrative of her own life, a key element of her public persona, provides a model for such stories (Valyaeva 2020). Valyaeva’s story is that of a development from a childhood in a single-parent household, poverty and aimlessness to a happy family with four kids and successful entrepreneurship. Other narratives involve a shorter timeline: for example, the story of a young woman who went hiking in a skirt in accordance with Vedic Femininity teachings and was cured from severe leg pain. These stories reinforce the authority of the Vedic psychology discourse and ensure that participants in the conversation stay motivated to model their behavior after it.

Another commonly used genre that reinforces the legitimacy of Vedic Wisdom is jokes. There are whole social networking pages dedicated to the dissemination of inside jokes that refer to different versions of Vedic Wisdom. ISKCON followers share memes, such as the image of a group of dirty pigs in a puddle calling their happy and clean counterpart a “sectarian,” or the image of a man announcing that he is about to tell his lover the “three most important words” – not “I love you,” as the reader expects, but “Hare Krishna Rama.” Online humor of the Ringing Cedars movement includes images such as a Soviet-style poster in which Anastasia depicted as Mother Russia, or the cover of a made-up computer game CD, in which the player is urged to “shoot a sectarian.” These jokes may offer criticism or poke some fun at excessive fanaticism. They may even include black humor, as seen in the last example. Ultimately, however, they serve to reinforce

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<sup>31</sup> Oring made this point in relation to truth claims in legends, but it equally applies to other statements of belief (2008).

the legitimacy and infallibility of Vedic Wisdom, which is shown to be so solid as to withstand being ridiculed. Like parables, these jokes are conservative. Posted online or told in casual situations, they confirm the rightness and righteousness of paths understood as Vedic.

I further discuss the subject of legitimation strategies in Articles 1 and 3. The first article takes a broader synchronic view, focusing on how different actors legitimize their interpretations of Vedic Wisdom in the context of the Child of Nature festival, which is a material embodiment of the plurality of the alternative spirituality network. In Article 3, I switch to a diachronic perspective, tracing the legitimation patterns invoked by one popular Vedic lecturer, Oleg Torsunov. His public position is often tentative and fraught, but it involves strong claims to being authoritative. When speaking to fellow ISKCON devotees, Torsunov explicitly references the movement's teaching in his statements, but in his popular lectures outside of ISKCON he combines a variety of sources of legitimacy to construct personal authority. For example, Torsunov showcases his academic credentials, confirms his position in the lineage of Vedic science, invokes healing abilities and tells relatable anecdotes.

In my research, I have found legitimation in the Vedic Wisdom discursive cluster – and, by extension, in the alternative spirituality milieu – to be very dynamic. It is not a once-and-for-all strategy, but a flexible and changeable process. As Uibu points out, legitimation does not have to be rigid; it just needs to create “the aura of general plausibility” (2016: 47). The way this aura of plausibility is created changes, following changes in personal relationships, fashionable ideas and even technological affordances.

The legitimation of one's own position often goes hand in hand with the delegitimation of the authority of others. This can occur in different ways. One possible strategy is to restrict the expression of other versions of truth. This can be done in form of argument – in books, online debates, and other texts – and in person, where the expression of certain interpretations may be restricted spatially, temporally, visually or aurally. Such public and far-reaching strategies of delegitimation are only available to people who have a lot of influence. In private conversations, however, delegitimation is a tool that anyone can use.

At the Child of Nature festival, only the organizers can openly wield such power, although ordinary participants can influence their decisions. The differences between Vedic Wisdoms that are co-present at the festival are reinforced by performative “boundary devices” (Noyes 2016: 23). Often a value judgment is attached. As described earlier, the Slavic tradition is the undeclared spiritual and aesthetic affiliation of the festival. Alternatives find expression in designated areas and at designated times: for example, at specific workshops.

I also discuss delegitimation strategies in Article 3. Torsunov's activity of adapting ISKCON ideas for the broader audience has been controversial. Conversations and debates around him render visible how delegitimation techniques work in a milieu of multiple Vedic Wisdoms and their various opponents. ISKCON members and even leaders have been concerned about differentiating Prabhupada's teachings from Torsunov's own ideas. These concerns led independent devotees

to contest Torsunov's authority, and ISKCON leadership to conduct a formal investigation of his practice. Specific groups of actors reach for different techniques to delegitimize Torsunov: for example, Krishna devotees usually seek to show that Torsunov's ideas are not in fact rooted in the Vedas or counter Prabhupada's teachings, while Russian Orthodox anticultists, by contrast, highlight his links with ISKCON. Meanwhile, critics of Vedic Femininity are less interested in the religious aspects of Torsunov's ideas, focusing instead on showing that his writings about gender are harmful to those who embrace them.

## Negotiation

Legitimation strategies may work well to establish the authority of a particular teaching, but they are not sufficient if a movement or a community is to flourish in the alternative spirituality milieu. In this heterogeneous world, groups have to coexist and in some cases collaborate. The Child of Nature festival is a perfect example of such a setting, because it requires from its participant an ability to work through differences and work together.

As festival participants negotiate how the term Vedic Wisdom can be used, they sometimes make use of legitimation and delegitimation strategies described above to reinforce boundaries. However, they must also build bridges: after all, they are united in the practical endeavor of making the festival a success. Tolerance yields obvious practical benefits. The team of organizers may be Slavic-leaning and less aligned with an India-centered vision of Krishna devotees, but they value the contributions of the ISKCON community to running the festival's catering, and see the kitchen team involved as responsible and trustworthy, in part because of their spiritual affiliation. Meanwhile, some of the festival's participants may feel uncomfortable with its recognizable Slavic flavor, but most respect the organizers as reliable, gregarious and firm leaders, from whose work everyone benefits. Since the process of organizing a festival requires people to set aside ideological differences to make sure the tents are set up and the participants are fed, Child of Nature is literally a space of collaboration between Vedic Wisdoms.

Such negotiation is not, of course, restricted to practical collaboration on a specific project. It can also take the form of spontaneous arrangements, jokes, and connections. The diverse atmosphere of the Child of Nature festival gives rise to unexpected and humorous instances of hybridity. The best example of such creative effervescence is the alternative version of Svetozar and Auramira's hit song *Mother Zhiva*. A friend of mine misheard the lyrics as "Mother Shiva," substituting the Hindu god of destruction for the Slavic goddess of fertility, to a hilarious and accidentally profound effect. From then on, some people deliberately sang the wrong words: a subtle difference perceived only by those in the know.

The Ringing Cedars of Russia, as mentioned before, is an ideologically diverse community. Given the democratic nature of Anastasia's vision and its emphasis on self-spirituality, the discursive space opened up by the books created as much opportunity for contesting authority as it did for asserting it. Ethnographic studies

of the movement reveal that Anastasia's followers embrace active, self-conscious, at times ironic attitudes to the ideas and values described in the books (Pranskevičiūtė 2015, Andreeva 2017). This independent creativity is reflected in the VK group "Creating the Image of the President!," which I analyze in Article 4. Despite putting forward a fairly tame political position, the group hosts nascent political debate in the comments. Reflecting the diversity of opinion within the Ringing Cedars community, the group has both enthusiastic and skeptical members.

In private conversations people advance their own visions of Vedic Wisdom, often with a humorous attitude that neither dismisses nor venerates a specific interpretation. When joking with their friends, people reinforce the role that the discourse of Vedic Wisdom plays in their understandings of the world and even transmit its utility to others, but they can also challenge or even ridicule its values. As a result, what may seem as conservative communities of vaguely nationalist back-to-the-landers or crafters clad in long skirts in fact contains a vibrant world of interpretive play. Practices of Vedic Femininity, for example, often involve implicit compromise. Women outwardly affirm the injunction to be submissive, but often retain a utilitarian, humorous or even critical attitude towards Vedic Femininity. A joke that I first heard at the 2012 Child of Nature festival makes fun of the perceived contagious fanaticism of the community: "you come to Child of Nature and you swear that you will stay normal, but during the festival, you are all of a sudden wearing a long skirt and flowers in your hair, and look, you are already in a blessed state, with cult-appropriate jewelry hanging all over you." Beyond jokes of this sort, I have also had many conversations about Vedic Wisdom that included complex and challenging reflections on the meaning and aspects of this teaching.

### **Spiritual intelligence**

The notion of a personal spiritual journey is a widespread foundational belief in the alternative spirituality realm. It relies on the idea that the source of wisdom lies within, and that it is the inner voice that serves as the final arbiter of truth claims. Even appeals to other sources of legitimation, such as science or tradition, are usually topped off with a call to the audience to have their own spiritual experiences (Uibu 2016: 57). These personal experiences are shaped by pre-existing narratives that model ways of partaking of the spiritual (ibid. 58). In this sense, explicit invocations of the need to make one's own path can serve to secure and promote particular ideas and interpretations that are created by others or by the community. This is the case, for example, with stories of women who used Vedic psychology to save their marriages.

Even when the empowerment of the individual to make decisions is mostly rhetorical, it still plays an important role: it opens up possibilities of moving between and outside different ideologies. Combined with the diverse nature of the spiritual milieu, which provides opportunities to socialize and collaborate with

people who embrace other paths, the rhetoric of “wisdom within” encourages individuals to use and celebrate their own ability to narrate and organize their religious life. The concept of Vedic Wisdom accommodates many meanings, inviting people to make sense of different paths and find their own place within it.

Since personal spiritual decisions are still limited by the available options (Hervieu-Léger 2006: 61), sharing ideas and resources is important. The role of the Child of Nature festival and the community surrounding it is precisely in supplying, expanding and elaborating on such available options. But such spaces also create possibilities for critique. At the 2013 Child of Nature, I witnessed such an occasion at a workshop on feminine spirituality. The speaker, a woman in her thirties dressed in a long skirt, intoned: “The woman is the river; the man is the banks.” A friend who was standing next to me balked at this phrase. Afterwards the friend spoke about being shocked by the contrast between the woman’s confident talk about the power and necessity of traditional femininity and her unkempt looks. For years afterwards, she brought up the phrase “the woman is the river, the man is the banks” to dismiss the grandiose claims of Vedic Femininity teachers and express her mistrust of any kind of confident and over-the-top rhetoric among teachers in the spirituality milieu.

It is important to note that “listening to your heart” is not understood by people in the milieu as a wishy-washy, emotional way of being. By contrast, people in Russian alternative spirituality circles often emphasize rationality and independent thinking. Even people who speak from within specific traditions often position themselves as autonomous meaning-makers, well-versed in different movements. In 2012, I was present at a conversation between a Vaishnava woman in her twenties and a younger female visitor to the School of Protective Arts in St Petersburg who was enthusiastic about exploring the Child of Nature community. Introducing different spiritual movements for the benefit of the newcomer, the Vaishnava woman sketched out the scene with admirable facility and humor: “The idea behind the festival is that in every ... ‘sect,’ so to speak... there is truth. That’s it. So one shouldn’t be fanatical.” Later, in an interview, the speaker acknowledged that some people have strong views that exclude other paths, but emphasized again and again the importance of being flexible and grounded. As an example, she mentioned a potter she knew who respected both Krishna and Anastasia: he “talks about prasadam once in a while, but at the same time he’s got a piece of cedar bark around his neck.” Acknowledging that her own spiritual home is not perfect, she celebrated the ability to be tolerant: “Really, let’s not be fanatical. There are many useful ideas [in ISKCON], but Hare Krishna, just like any other movement, has pluses and minuses. ... Non-fanatical Hare Krishnas ... like Torsunov ... accept all movements, all directions, all denominations” (August 9, 2012). Sympathetic devotees often celebrate Torsunov’s work for this flexibility. In online comments and forum discussions, they express appreciation for the fact that his ideas do not require conversion but are freely available and can be genuinely helpful to independent-thinking listeners.

This point of view encourages viewing different paths of Vedic Wisdom in a utilitarian fashion. In one interview, Anna, who is an insider in the world of

Femininity specialists, talked rather cynically about the realities of the market: “Now people have understood that this is a golden mine in terms of profit. So everyone and their grandmother is giving workshops these days. It’s true. Everyone, everyone, everyone” (4 July 2012). But while many people I met in the field hoped to make a living doing creative or healing work in the informal economy of the alternative spirituality milieu, they also remained committed to speaking and thinking about their own spiritual growth. Earning money was seen as something that would enable this growth, and help others develop as well.

People’s behavior in the world of alternative spirituality cannot be explained as merely casual shopping for spiritual products. For many of my interviewees, the question of following your spiritual path is a question neither of total conversion nor of casual consumption, but rather of shifting investment and ongoing growth. Some people behave as “multiple” or “serial seekers,” exploring several spiritual traditions simultaneously or successively (Sutcliffe 2003: 204). In both cases, people’s preference for ISKCON lectures or Megre’s books is not always grounded in a belief in its absolute truth, but often in the perceived practical use of ideas found there in daily material and spiritual lives. Out of the network of conflicting truth claims, these spiritual seekers create a subjectively meaningful experience.

Many people I interviewed think in complex and nuanced ways about the validity of the category of spirituality and its application in practice. Over the years that I have known them, some people have moved from an enthusiastic and uncritical belief in a particular version of Vedic Wisdom to a more utilitarian approach or even outright rejection – or, by contrast, from gravitating towards one version of Vedic Wisdom to accepting another as more authoritative and meaningful. In making these decisions or feeling out the path that feels right, people link Vedic prescriptions to their personal realities. They reference Russian social norms, such as the self-reliant attitudes of their mothers that stemmed in part from the economic hardships of the 1990s, and popular media images: from *Mahabharat*, the 2013 Indian TV adaptation of the eponymous epic, to the American television classic *Sex and The City* (Tewary et al. 2013, Star et al. 1998). These examples point to the ways that lived experiences of Vedic Wisdom are also shaped by the world beyond alternative spirituality.

### **4.3 How does alternative spirituality persist in contemporary Russia?**

Designating my object of research as “alternative” has been crucial to describing its position in Russian society. It allowed me to highlight that different versions of Vedic Wisdom, no matter their roots, share the same milieu, which is not central to cultural life in contemporary Russia, and sometimes stigmatized. In this and the next sections, I interrogate just how unusual this subsection of alternative spirituality really is, and tackle the following questions: if Russian society is

hostile to religious dissent, as many observers have pointed out, how can alternatives to “traditional Russian values,” persist? Is there something in Vedic Wisdom that is in fact congruent with the mainstream?

The story of religious diversity in contemporary Russia is often told as a rise and fall, traced from liberation in the early 1990s to increased state control in the 2000s. Contemporary Russia often appears in media and scholarship as a state with a restricted public sphere in which the Russian Orthodox Church has particular social and political influence. This image is obviously rooted in social and legal realities: many movements of alternative spirituality are depicted in the Russian media in a negative light, and there have been cases of harassment of religious minorities. All versions of Vedic Wisdom that I describe in this project – the Ringing Cedars of Russia, ISKCON, and Vedic Psychology – have faced public image issues. Anticultists have labeled them “totalitarian sects” (Dvorkin 2002)<sup>32</sup> and various media have depicted them in a negative light (for example, Lonskaya 2011, Polianichko 2013, Kroitor 2013, Gribatskaya 2015, Perova 2015).

Still, the image of a neotraditionalist Russia hostile to all forms of dissent begs for nuance. After all, alternative spirituality continues to exist and even flourish in the country. How is this possible, given the existing legislation coupled with the spectacle of the Russian Orthodox Church’s rising power? Looking exclusively at media controversies and court cases does not explain how discourses of Vedic Wisdom can remain afloat.

In the United States, controversy around alternative spirituality has settled down in a specific way, aided by the national ideology that incorporates the idea of freedom of conscience and, more pragmatically, by the omnivorous capitalist system. In Russia, the situation is different. The state’s approach to national identity construction has recently relied on the idea of tradition rather than freedom or radical breaks with the past, which makes it less conducive to incorporating aspects of Russian life that appear as divergent: too new, too globalized, too experimental. As a result, alternative spirituality is not being celebrated as a natural part of Russian life. But, crucially, it has not been excluded either. Rather, alternative spiritual projects exist in a state of a tense suspension, neither at ease nor under constant threat.

Several external factors combine to create opportunities for alternative spiritual movements to persist. As the political upheavals of the early 1990s died down, many New Religious Movements and New Age groups became less radical (Shterin 2001: 314). Moreover, aggressive anticultism has attracted criticism even from Russian Orthodox voices (for example, Kon’ 2008: 74). Another reason could be distraction, since the media imaginary in Russia, as in many other countries, is occupied with another kind of threat: radical Islam.

In addition to these environmental factors, some strategies used by spiritual seekers themselves allow for flourishing in difficult conditions. Birgit Menzel has

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<sup>32</sup> The missionary portal “K-Istine” dedicated whole sections to the “neo-Hinduist Pagan sect” of ISKCON and the “Neo-Pagan occult sect” of the Ringing Cedars (Religions and Sects in Russia 2020).

shown that the Soviet cultic milieu persisted because followers of alternative spirituality did not explicitly reject official structures but rather negotiated them (Menzel 2012: 11). This approach seems to be adapted by followers of Vedic Wisdoms in contemporary Russia. I have identified four strategies that are used in such negotiations: humor, ideological alignment with the status quo, a flexible approach to legitimation, and a shift from religious rhetoric to popular psychology.

The first strategy is humor. During my fieldwork, I frequently heard people use the term *sektant* (which in context can be translated as “cult member”) in everyday conversations to identify themselves and others as participants in the network of Russian alternative spirituality. This concept, used by the media and the Russian Orthodox Church, is a derogatory description of followers of New Religious Movements (*sekta* in contemporary use is the Russian equivalent of the English “cult”). However, the term has been adopted and used ironically by the followers of these movements themselves. This appropriation of a derogatory term, akin to the adoption of the term queer by the LGBTQ community, serves to indicate the awareness of a label imposed from the outside, the recognition of its inappropriateness, and a decision to forcefully reclaim it as a sign of the community’s invincibility in response to discursive violence (Oring 2010).

The second strategy of negotiation with the wider society used by alternative spirituality followers is the opposite of the humorous flaunting of difference: it is the decision to identify with the political status quo, most often through invoking conservative values. Marat Shterin describes the appeal to tradition as a form of social capital used by the state and anti-cultist actors (Shterin 2001: 311). Followers of New Religious Movements, he writes, usually use another common form of social capital – appeals to freedom of religion and human rights. However, with some groups, including ISKCON and the Ringing Cedars of Russia, the emphasis on tradition and family values makes internal doctrinal sense.

The gender-focused teachings of Vedic psychology are especially well-suited to being aligned with the conservative agenda in today’s Russia, where fears of Westernization are often focused on gender and sexuality (Riabova and Riabov 2017: 19). This explains why a woman who practiced Vedic Femininity recommended to me some Russian Orthodox lectures on family psychology, and why Torsunov sometimes plays recordings of Russian Orthodox choirs during his lectures. The resilience of ISKCON-derived Vedic psychology in the contemporary Russian cultural climate rests partly on downplaying the more exotic aspects of the teachings for a wider audience while promoting safely conservative gender roles.

The Ringing Cedars of Russia movement, despite being criticized by the media and the Russian Orthodox Church, is also aligned in important ways with Russia’s cultural politics. Anastasia’s ideas often overlap with the discourse of the Russian government on the subject of national identity. Both embrace a vision of the nation that is capacious enough to include religious and ethnic diversity, but soothingly reiterates the importance of the Russian tradition. I discuss an example of this alignment in Article 4, showing that Ringing Cedars memes of Putin riff on the pre-existing master-meme of the President. This master-meme

shows Putin to be in communion with Russian nature. The “Creating the Image of the President!” group and the Ringing Cedars movement in general welcomes expressions of patriotism and support of the president’s policies. But while the memes may seem to be simply pro-government, they reflect a practical survival strategy. They show enough alignment with the status quo to continue pursuing and even promote the movement’s teachings.

The Vedic communities I mentioned do not simply reproduce Kremlin visuals or the rhetoric of family values. Rather, they actively seek to change the world they live in: in case of Megre’s books, through transforming society into an ecological utopia; in case of ISKCON, through raising the levels of individual purity and devotion to the divine; in case of Vedic psychology, through helping establish a certain model of family that is seen as crucial to social and individual flourishing.

The third feature that makes Vedic Wisdom resilient is a flexible approach to legitimation. Torsunov’s case is particularly telling, as he was able to successfully shift emphasis onto different sources of legitimacy in response to controversy and challenges. As a young man, Torsunov was shaped by the late Soviet cultic milieu: not only ISKCON, the tradition to which he belongs now, but also conversations with a psychic neighbor and the experimental health practices of Porfiry Ivanov (Torsunov 2017). Those influences remain operative in his repertoire. In the 1990s, he emerged as a healer who blended idiosyncratic medical practices with elements of Ayurveda. He presented himself, therefore both as a guide to the world of Indian spirituality and an authoritative doctor. By the late 2000s and 2010s, Torsunov broke into popular psychology, promoting an emergent version of Vedic psychology and insisting that there is no need to convert to any religion to benefit from its insights.

The fourth strategy that helps alternative spiritual ideas find a place in contemporary Russian public sphere is the move away from explicitly religious terminology. But it does not mean that the ideas, aesthetics and practices of the alternative spiritual realm disappear. Under the banner of self-development, they spill out into the larger society. Made palatable and exciting to a wider audience, they persist and disseminate in the less controversial form of popular psychology and self-help. Positioning Vedic Femininity as an ethical choice or a matter of psychology, rather than a question of conversion, successful influencers such as Olga Valyaeva build their readership among people familiar with the spirituality milieu and those who have not been exposed to it.

While alternative forms of spirituality are still suspect in Russia, they are not absent from the public sphere. Spiritual seeking continues in different, sometimes less spectacular, forms, due to strategies such as humor, strategic alignment with state ideology, flexibility in legitimation, and a shift from religious language to that of popular psychology. There is, however, another set of reasons for the persistence of alternative spirituality and Vedic Wisdom in particular. Today, the Vedic Wisdom tradition is shaped by global technologies and patterns of subjectivation that shape Russian society.

## 4.4 How are discourses of Vedic Wisdom shaped by global factors?

Russian anti-cultists habitually link alternative spirituality with the threat of Westernization. The insight is reasonable: alternative spirituality is indeed implicated in global social and technological changes. It does not, however, mean that it advances interests of foreign actors or states. Around the world, the influence of globalization on cultural forms is the rule rather than the exception. Moreover, Russian popular culture at large is mediated by the internet and late capitalism. As mentioned above, even Russian anti-cultism has global connections and American roots. Everyone, both “sectarians” and anti-cultists, is being globalized at the same time. Global factors also shape the discursive cluster of Russian Vedic Wisdom. The main such factor, I argue, is neoliberal cultural logic.

Alternative spirituality is often described as a marketplace; this is certainly the case for Vedic Wisdom. From seminars on sustainable construction and Vaishnava business courses to sales of cedar oil and fashion blogging, the brand of Vedic Wisdom appears in many guises and engages people in different patterns of consumer or producer behavior. To understand the role of the market in discourses of Vedic Wisdom, it is not enough to ring alarm bells about consumerism. I am interested in how the production and consumption of spiritual value of Vedic Wisdom takes place.

The way consumerism works has been changing rapidly over the past decade, and the framework of a spiritual supermarket needs updating in an age of social media marketing. The late twentieth-century idea of consumerism presupposes a self-identical subject who does the buying. But the advent of a social media-driven economy in which users produce content for free requires some adjustment to that model. What shapes the functioning of many popular alternative spirituality practices today, and explains how Vedic Wisdom reached a wide audience, is the neoliberal vision of the self as human capital, which is being experienced, performed and lived on social media.

The logic of social media encourages people to focus on building, improving and displaying themselves, rather than on buying something external to themselves for private use. It is not a consumerist market in which people buy identities, but a prosumerist space, where the care of the self is often inextricably linked to the production of a virtual self and of selfies. Social media also offers ways of monetizing one’s identity and daily life not just for social capital but for actual money. Consumption and production are thus rolled into one.

These new digitally mediated practices render obvious one pre-existing aspect of much of alternative spirituality: that its pursuit is a production process, where the self is both the raw material and the result. On the one hand, many types of alternative spirituality emphasize the holiness of the self; on the other, that self must be awakened through lifestyle changes and ongoing maintenance. This gap creates a need for management, and discourses of spirituality and psychology readily offer appropriate techniques. Because alternative spirituality already

possesses these important elements of the neoliberal logic, it is easy to combine with entrepreneurship and consumption.

But social networks have also restructured the habitus of spiritual self-improvement. All versions of Vedic Wisdom readily embrace new technology. This explains why we see similar kinds of online self-development groups that come from different versions of Vedic Wisdom: you can learn to be Vedic in a more or less Hindu, more or less Slavic, more or less secular way. Even in movements like the Ringing Cedars, which involve a critique of the technocratic way of life, people rarely seek to go off the grid and instead enthusiastically use the Internet for coordination, expression and entrepreneurship.

Social media allowed spiritual seekers easy access to ways of learning about and sharing self-development techniques, all the while producing themselves as subjects for public viewing and consumption. In the digitally mediated market, the aim is not only to sell a product but also to draw people in by creating a way of life into which they can plug in.

This process is most obvious with Vedic Femininity, which on social media quickly developed into a hashtagable lifestyle brand with inspiration posts and action points, led by minor influencers like the aforementioned Olga Valyaeva (@olgavalyaeva, 438,000 followers) and the fashion designer Katerina Dorokhova (@vrajavali, 188,000 followers).<sup>33</sup> Many more enterprising content creators promote their own versions of Vedic Wisdom on the market of popular psychology, using appeals to tradition to distinguish their product from others and compete with other writers for sales of books, online seminars and event tickets. They provide content, such as lectures, videos, articles, or Instagram posts, offering to help people transform their diet or move to an ecovillage. Followers interested in starting their own Vedic business can easily find Vaishnava business coaches or femininity-focused career consultants.

Under current economic conditions, the work of turning oneself into human capital is largely unavoidable. It is not all bad, either. First of all, it can be a meaningful activity. As people engage in practices of self-description, as well as listening, reading and learning, they can alter, at least partially, the contents and patterns of their lives. Sharing on social media can help people find community and initiate interactions that can give birth to friendships, new ideas or activities. Moreover, identity entrepreneurship may well be profitable, allowing people to receive an income and find work that, while precarious, can be fulfilling, creative, and, at the very least, better than nothing. Valyaeva, who supports her husband and children with her work as an influencer, is a notable, if not particularly representative, example.

Unfortunately, investments in the self do not always pay off as well as they promise to. The negative aspects of the neoliberal logic have been extensively analyzed by cultural theorists; I will mention two features that are particularly salient for the seekers of Vedic Wisdom. First, by offering techniques of self-management in place of tools for action, neoliberal logic places the responsibility

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<sup>33</sup> As of 14 April 2020.

for success and misfortune squarely on the individual. Second, it suspends the subject in pursuit of a goal that may be unachievable or harmful.

In the alternative spirituality milieu, the idea of personal responsibility for misfortune exacerbates a preexisting emphasis on finding the ultimate truth within yourself. As discussed above, designating the individual's "divine self" as the final arbiter of truth can empower people to develop spiritual intelligence. At the same time, it means that people's life difficulties can be blamed on their lack of enlightenment, not being fully in touch with their inner source of wisdom. The world of popular psychology, which overlaps with alternative spirituality, similarly prioritizes individual thought patterns as vehicles for improving one's life. This approach draws attention from the large-scale problems that shape people's conditions (Madsen 2014).

Within the alternative spirituality milieu, the teaching of creative visualization, or manifestation of desired effects through the power of thought, is one of the main mechanisms of assigning responsibility to the individual. If one's conditions are created by one's thoughts, then illness or poverty can be seen as the result of those thoughts being insufficiently positive (Andreeva 2018: 103–104). In the teachings of Vedic Femininity, women's adherence to particular gender norms is imagined as the decisive factor in their lives. In this framework, women are made responsible for not being happy, safe or successful. Vedic Femininity teachings can encourage women to remain in dangerous situations in the hopes of improving their circumstances through working on themselves. The tragic consequences of such a dynamic were revealed in a recent domestic violence and murder case in Togliatti, after the victim's acquaintance shared in an interview that the murdered woman had been listening to Vedic Femininity lectures (Kostarnova 2019). This domestic violence example, extreme as it is, reflects the wider problem of alternative spirituality under neoliberalism: the idea of individual responsibility makes it impossible to recognize or address structural issues, such as, in this case, the problem of misogyny and violence against women.

Finally, the idea of self-improvement as a spiritual project has another catch: it can easily become never-ending. The proliferation of techniques for developing oneself after a specific ideal suggests that the targeted state of Vedic Wisdom is always just out of grasp. Whether to awaken the Vedrussian within, or to reach a state of blissful unity with the divine, or to build fulfilling relationships, the individual must be vigilant and persistent. In some cases, the commitment to self-improvement may open up to a relation of "cruel optimism," an attachment to ways of being that preclude the improvement they promise (Berlant 2011: 1).

One of the women I spoke with described a similar mechanism at work in her own life: "...partly through inertia, partly with the aim of searching for truth, I continue to dig in the place where I have already experienced a lot of disappointments" (4 July 2012). At the time, the speaker exhibited self-awareness and detachment, which are not always available to people. Several other people with whom I have spoken over the years describe being stuck in a loop when trying to develop themselves according to Vedic guidelines. In 2018, another woman told me that she regrets trying to follow Vedic Femininity guidelines in

the first few years of her marriage. She described blaming herself for her own failures while continuing to consume Vedic Femininity content. In hindsight, she evaluates the teachings as inappropriate to her family and not aimed at modern women. As evidenced from the emergent body of anti-Vedic Femininity testimonials online, this example is representative of the experiences of a portion of women who pursued Vedic ideals. In these cases, people revisit their attempts at self-improvement and evaluate those attempts as having paralyzed them and stalled their development.

Vedic practices of self-development are not determined by neoliberal logic of responsabilization, but they overlap with it. In this respect, despite being part of alternative spirituality, Vedic practices are nevertheless profoundly mainstream. They may invoke visions of ancient civilizations, issue critiques of the modern lifestyle, and call for profound social transformations, but ultimately, they do not challenge the underlying cultural regime that shapes the Russian public sphere. In this section, I have emphasized the downsides of this state of affairs, but I recognize that it is not only restricting, but also enabling of flourishing and creativity.

Existing in a tense equilibrium within the Russian state and the global neoliberal regime, the vernacular tradition of Vedic Wisdom accommodates a multitude of individual and collective projects. Some notable examples of these projects, as well as their interactions and mutual influence, are analyzed in the four articles summarized below.

## 5. SUMMARY OF ARTICLES

My investigation of the polysemic concept of Vedic Wisdom is grounded in four case studies. Though ranging in scope and method, all of them highlight processes of negotiation and interaction between parts of the Vedic Wisdom discursive cluster.

Article 1 analyzes the entanglements between different interpretations of Vedic Wisdom at the Child of Nature Festival, which brings together several communities of alternative spirituality. Article 2 focuses on the role of humor in negotiating the meaning of the Vedrussian lifestyle and challenging authority in the Ringing Cedars of Russia movement. In Article 3, I interrogate the multiple legitimation strategies used by Oleg Torsunov, an ISKCON lecturer who popularized Vedic Wisdom for a wider audience. Article 4 returns to the Ringing Cedars of Russia case to continue this investigation of the role of Vedic Wisdom in broader society. It shows how the idea of manifesting reality with the power of thought finds an unexpected embodiment in internet memes of Vladimir Putin.

### **5.1 Summary of Article 1: The New Age Paradox: Spiritual Consumerism and Traditional Authority at the Child of Nature Festival in Russia**

*Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 2017, 32 (1), 83–103.

This article addresses the paradox of contemporary New Age spirituality, which combines the individualist ideology of the capitalist market with truth claims that invoke the authority of tradition. The underlying assumption of the New Age – that there is one universal Truth in many guises – supports this type of legitimation. I argue that this paradox can be illuminated from a transcultural ethnographic perspective with the help of the concept of vernacular belief. The emphasis on lived experience reveals the New Age as a mutable and diverse set of practices from which we cannot expect ideological coherence. Analyzing the plural ideological landscape of one St Petersburg festival, this article investigates how its participants deal with competing narratives of universal truth, all of which pivot on one term, “Vedic wisdom.”

With its emphasis on individual spiritual self-development, Child of Nature fits well within the general New Age context, while the particular truths evoked at the festival and attendant power struggles reflect its Russian context. The enthusiastic accounts of many Child of Nature participants certainly suggest that people derive personal meaning from ideas packaged as products for consumption. With its pluralist agenda, the festival proudly displays individualist attitudes associated with the New Age. Even the most eclectic marketplace cannot, however, function without some common ground. And that common ground can be tense, because it is articulated by many people.

The study of one Russian festival demonstrates the lived reality of the interplay of individualism and traditionalism, suggesting that the answer to this paradox lies in approaching New Age beliefs as vernacular. The radical pluralism of the festival is also restricted by New Age essentialism. The idea of one truth in various guises both supports and weakens the festival's pluralist agenda. Seeking to promote their activities, individuals may enter silent disagreements or open conflicts. The situation is complicated further when several groups lay claim to the same ancient tradition, which they understand differently.

The festival is an intersection of many versions of Vedic Wisdom, which in the article I group into Hindu-based and Slavic-based versions. Participants articulate these versions, seeking to distinguish them as different and more correct. But representatives that embody different paths also have to coexist for pragmatic reasons: for example, the performers of Russian Pagan songs in stylized folk costumes come to eat vegetarian food prepared and blessed by Krishna devotees. I conclude the article by discussing humor that arises from such negotiations.

In the article, I have argued for embracing the term New Age despite its problematic and uncertain nature. The term, I explained, functions as a useful set of associations, changeable yet still recognizable, convenient and even accurate. In the case of Child of Nature, this eclectic concept appropriately reflects the shifting and heterogeneous reality of the festival. In the context of my larger project, which incorporates movements that are more specific and developed, like ISKCON, I prefer the more inclusive term of alternative spirituality.

## **5.2 Summary of Article 2: Humour and Resistance in Russia's Ecological Utopia (A Look at the Anastasia Movement)**

Ülo Valk and Marion Bowman (eds.) *Contesting Authority: Vernacular Knowledge and Alternative Beliefs*. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing (forthcoming).

Departing from the spiritual crossroads of the Child of Nature festival, this article takes a closer look at the Anastasia movement. Discussing the jokes and parodies created by Anastasians, I show that humor provides their members with the means of supporting, challenging, or creatively negotiating structures of authority within the communities and the ideology that engendered them.

Intentional communities, with their aspirations to build an alternative world here and now, as well as their relative independence from larger economic structures, are among the strongest embodiments of the counterculture. But while they aim to liberate followers from "the system," such movements inevitably develop authority structures of their own as they attempt to organize people into action based on assertions of greater truth. In the case of Anastasia, this truth is linked with the vision of Vedrussian civilization, and the "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1988) and communal action that are believed to bring it about.

The Ringing Cedars of Russia does not have a strong authority structure that many other intentional communities and spiritual movements have, but the question of authority still poses a problem for the movement when it comes to the practical application of Anastasia's ideas. Anastasia communities are sites of negotiation of what Vedrusian practice looks like.

Despite the multiplicity of its potential functions, the role of humor in relation to authority has been discussed as either reinforcing the *status quo* (Oring 2008: 185) or challenging established power relations (ibid. 187). This dichotomy also gives rise to a synthesis: an approach to humor as an ambivalent phenomenon which both upholds and resists the hegemonic order (Bakhtin 1984).

In the Anastasia movement, individuals use humor to establish and interpret their relationship with authoritative interpretations of the books' message in various ways. Humor can reinforce a sense of community by confirming "orthodox" values or by enabling criticism of certain aspects of the movement. On one end of the spectrum, I discuss the term "sectarian" used by members of the Anastasia community as a tongue-in-cheek self-description alongside parody videos created by the Khortitsa group. In these cases, exaggerating stereotypes and behavior patterns of Anastasia followers allows people to ridicule the sense of spiritual superiority of fellow members of the movement. On the other end of the spectrum, there is a more formalized, even institutionalized, type of humor, such as, for example, the now dormant Ringing Cedars of Russia website, which does not challenge the authority of Megre's books but rather builds on forms of acceptable humor established within them.

Finally, I discuss spontaneous joking that occurred in my conversations with participants during my fieldwork, to argue that there is a third way in which humor can structure individuals' relationships to authority. Humor creates multiple discursive pathways through which people negotiate their personal spiritual journeys, understand the distribution of authority in social settings and exercise "independent thinking," so prized in the Anastasia movement and in New Age in general (Heelas 1996: 23). Anastasia's followers and other self-aware spiritual seekers use humor actively, critically and self-reflexively as they wrestle with important questions of how to relate to the truth they choose to embrace, how to coexist with others who may or may not share their vision of this truth, and how to make this truth a part of their personal lives.

### **5.3 Summary of Article 3: Legitimizing New Religiosity in Contemporary Russia: "Vedic Wisdom" Under Fire**

*Nova Religio*, forthcoming.

This article tackles Vedic psychology, the most widely popular and the most vaguely defined node in the cluster of Vedic Wisdoms that I investigate. As a popular offshoot of the ISKCON movement in Russian-speaking communities in Russia and the Baltics, Vedic psychology became a site for heated negotiations

of what Vedic Wisdom means. In the article, I map the discursive landscape surrounding one popular Vedic lecturer, Oleg Torsunov, attending to the rhetorical strategies of legitimation and delegitimation used by him, his supporters and his detractors.

Having positioned himself as an expert in Vedic spiritual knowledge, Torsunov claims to translate it into Russian realities. Torsunov became a Krishna devotee in the 1990s, but he has positioned himself to the more general audience as an authority on alternative holistic medicine and family psychology. Crossing boundaries between religion, New Age spirituality, and popular psychology, his teachings on personal improvement reference the Hindu tradition broadly understood, draw on Krishna Consciousness doctrine, and echo American self-help bestsellers, such as John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992). Torsunov is mostly famous for popularizing an ISKCON-inspired but transformed version of Vedic Wisdom. His lectures on Vedic Femininity are especially well-known.

In the 2010s, at the height of his popularity, Torsunov found himself in trouble with an unusually diverse cast of critics. The project of debunking his claims and exposing his errors involved the Russian Orthodox Church, neo-Hindu anti-cultists, feminist bloggers, psychologists, disappointed patients, interested observers, and the National Council of the Center of Krishna Consciousness Societies in Russia. Despite the controversies, Torsunov's practice has flourished, going at once more mainstream, with thousands of online followers and positive media exposure, and more controversial, attracting scrutiny and criticism from a wide set of interested actors.

Besieged from all sides of the ideological spectrum, this prolific man is a fascinating example of a contemporary Russian guru, at once representative and unique. Torsunov's persistent if troubled public presence illuminates our understanding of legitimation strategies used by controversial gurus and helps us understand the paradoxical resilience of Russian alternative spirituality in a hostile cultural environment.

Why do public figures like Torsunov seem unsinkable, despite their implication in controversies? The secret to such resilience is the approach to legitimation: what I call the "legitimation lattice," which gets its structural soundness from diverse sources of authority. This approach allows its user to combine and move flexibly between them, adjusting the rhetoric to make teachings appealing and convincing.

Torsunov's legitimation lattice extends across the realms of medicine, new religiosity, New Age and popular psychology. To account for his various influences and appeal to different audiences, Torsunov relies on four legitimation strategies: 1. rational appeals to science and medicine; 2. traditional appeals to the Vedas and vaguely defined Indian wisdom; 3. charismatic appeals to his own insights and abilities; 4. appeals to his audience's common sense and stereotypes.

While Torsunov maintains these varied sources of legitimacy with relative success, many observers are not convinced. Some of his critics are direct competitors: religious actors from the Russian Orthodox Church, ISKCON, other

Hindu movements, as well as alternative healers and even Wiccans. Others – secular anticultists, bloggers and journalists – are external observers. The third group of detractors are former patients or Vedic Femininity followers. The whirlpools of controversy around Torsunov remain distinct but partially overlap. Torsunov’s critics have problematized his religious affiliation, scientific soundness and medical practice, faithfulness to Krishna Consciousness and gender ideology.

Though the accusations are grave and the debunking campaigns thorough, none have decisively delegitimized Torsunov. His lectures, clubs and festivals remain popular. The “legitimation lattice,” with its flexible structure of discrete interlocking “strips,” allows empirically unsupported and easily debunked views to remain resilient and attractive. At the same time, the complexity of his legitimation structure makes it vulnerable to a variety of potential critiques. Legitimation lattices of public figures like Torsunov constitute dynamic balancing acts and moving targets: they require their users to keep adjusting the strategies in response to actual or potential attacks. The model of legitimation proposed in the article thus helps us understand better both the post-Soviet religious landscape, and the wider phenomenon of controversial celebrity experts of the “post-truth” era.

#### **5.4 Summary of Article 4: The President in Earthly Paradise: Putin Memes and Visions of the Nation**

*Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* (abstract accepted, in review).

Approaching the well-trod matter of internet political folklore from the unusual angle of alternative spirituality, this article argues for a wider conception of online political agency. I discuss earnest memes featuring Vladimir Putin that are produced by Anastasia followers, and show that they are not simply a fringe phenomenon of the Russian internet, but a form of political action deeply rooted in Anastasian metaphysics.

The political potential of digitally manipulated viral images is an important topic of scholarly inquiry in studies of media, culture and folklore. Although researchers emphasize the memes’ variety, generative quality, and irony, many focus on the few urgent themes of oppression, resistance and disruption. This concentration on the spectacular political effects of memes is understandable, but it also has costs, limiting our understanding of memes as vehicles of political agency to the reductive binary of power and resistance. This article expands the usual focus of meme studies by attending to some ambivalent and unexpected political uses of memes. To understand this ambivalence, I ask how memes serve political functions that fall outside the overdetermined framework of imposition and subversion of ideological content. Answering this question, I argue, requires tending to the specific discursive and material context of memes.

The article focuses on memetic images of Russia's president Vladimir Putin, which are especially conducive to the power/resistance binary. These images tend to be analyzed either as government propaganda (in the case of official photographs and internet memes that supported their message) or as oppositional political critique (in the case of satirical internet memes). But insofar as Putin memes are representative of this duality, they can also help complicate it. Researchers of popular images of Putin acknowledge that there is something within the field of visual Putiniana (Cassiday and Johnson 2010) that exceeds the functions of propaganda and satire.

The focus of the article is a major subsection of Putiniana: images featuring Putin in nature. Official images of the shirtless president enjoying masculine activities in nature communicated a clear vision of a renewed and powerful nation went viral as soon as the first batch was published in 2007. They also inspired a wave of humorous internet memes that mocked the originals or critiqued Russia's politics. The official and unofficial images exhibit continuity rather than a clear opposition. Through visual irony, Putin memes reveal both the paradoxical nature of digital political participation and the transgressive aspects of Russian political culture. Whether positively or negatively inflected, Putin memes work by being at once serious and humorously self-aware.

Next, the article examines a subsection of Putin memes that lies decidedly outside of the binary: memes produced within the Ringing Cedars of Russia movement. While most political memes make use of popular culture (Tay 2012: 11), Ringing Cedars memes blend politics with spirituality, placing Putin into pastoral landscapes or ascribing to him inspiring speeches about transforming the world into a beautiful garden.

These memes have three important features. First, they replicate the aesthetic form of internet memes, but deviate from the mainstream of the genre because they are neither absurd nor mocking. Second, they are produced by a movement of alternative spirituality that is criticized by the media and the Russian Orthodox Church, but their messages are aligned in important ways with the official ideology promoted by the government. Third, the Ringing Cedars representations of Putin do not replicate the message of the official photos, but instead adapt its visual markers to articulate a different kind of political agency. Falling outside the power/resistance model, this form of agency is deeply rooted in the metaphysics of the movement and aspects of global New Age.

Instead of voicing an opinion within an existing debate, these memes channel a specific kind of political agency. Their purpose is neither to edify nor critique the status quo, but rather to visualize and manifest a desired future by mobilizing the material power of thought. This unusual but informative case shows that memes enable forms of political agency that are more diverse than it may seem.

## 6. CONCLUSION: VERNACULAR THEORIZING

This project has analyzed different aspects of the vernacular belief tradition of Vedic Wisdom, a prominent part of the alternative spirituality scene in contemporary Russia. To study the dynamics of this landscape of belief, I proposed focusing not on a specific movement or the alternative spiritual milieu in general, but rather on a cross-section of spiritual discourses. This framework helped reveal the spectrum of meanings associated with Vedic Wisdom in Russia and the ways in which people negotiate them.

In this introduction, I explained what Vedic Wisdom is and what it includes. I argued that in this context, it must be understood as a distinctly Russian phenomenon that developed in intersecting spheres of Hindu- and Slavic-based religious groups and currents of popular psychology. I have also shown that Vedic Wisdom is part of the global landscape of belief, in which ideas and practices associated with New Religious Movements, New Age, Neo-Paganism, self-help and other forms of spirituality coexist, transform as they move across borders, and develop unexpected affinities. I also discussed some factors that contribute to the persistence of this tradition in contemporary Russian society (notably, the movements' strategic alignment with the state's cultural policy) and showed how Vedic Wisdom is shaped by global factors such as social media and the neoliberal logic of responsabilization.

In the four articles and the project in general, I have sought to strike a balance between structure and agency: describing the larger forces that impact the lived experience of Vedic Wisdom and shedding light on people's negotiation of the meaning of truth and the power dynamics in their communities with the help of legitimation strategies, humor, personal stories and other tools. I would like to conclude by turning, once again, to possibilities of agency, and considering how Vedic Wisdom is shaped by the seekers themselves.

I acknowledge that religions perceived as non-traditional have a marginalized position in Russian society, and I do not subscribe to a rosy vision of the internet as a utopia of connectivity and self-expression. However, I would argue that the current conditions of alternative spirituality are not only limiting but enabling. Despite restrictive laws and the ubiquitous model of neoliberal subjectivity, there is room for individual paths of gaining spiritual intelligence and for collective projects of vernacular theorizing.

Spiritual intelligence, as explained above, is a personal process of gathering data and experience that shapes individual strategies for living, thriving and making sense. During my fieldwork, I have observed how Vedic Wisdom played a role in these processes. For some people, the meaning of Vedic Wisdom changed over time as they explored different spiritual traditions and practices. Others chose a specific path – a Vaishnava community or a sustainable ecovillage – and shaped their life accordingly. Finally, for some people, the meaning of Vedic Wisdom remained stable, but they themselves changed, rejecting or drifting away from the ideas they once found important. I argue that these individual processes

of developing spiritual intelligence are influenced by communal practices of vernacular theorizing. If spiritual intelligence involves the development of competence about one's own path, vernacular theorizing analyzes spirituality itself and its place in the world.

Vernacular theories “arise out of intensely local issues that lead to fundamental theoretical questions” (McLaughlin 1996: 6). The term “vernacular theory” emerges as a challenge to the hierarchy inscribed in the word “theory” itself. As Charles Briggs puts it, “What gets defined as ‘theory’ is what can best dress itself up as rational, general, disinterested, abstract, and universal – that is, as quintessentially modern and ‘Western’” (2008: 98). In this model, to be able to be recognized as theorizing, one must have the appropriate social status and resources. By contrast, people who create the cultural phenomena studied by scholars are seen as “purveyors of folklore who lack the ability to consciously analyze forms” (Briggs 2008: 99).

The idea of vernacular theory challenges this view, not simply by acknowledging that the “folk” engage in some form of second-rate theorizing, but that all of us, academics or not, are theorizing in the wild, using tools and discourses available in our location. It is true that people have different resources for articulating and spreading ideas beyond their community. Nevertheless, scholars can attempt to level the field by at the very least acknowledging that both academics and non-academics theorize, and better yet, by pursuing “juxtapositions between knowledge-making practices across the lines of discipline, class, race, nation, and professional status” (Briggs 2008: 101). To make such juxtapositions possible, we need to speak not only of vernacular theories of culture – as opposed to institutional ones – but of theory as a vernacular phenomenon, or better yet, of theorizing as a vernacular process.

In the communities around Vedic Wisdom, vernacular theorizing involves receiving, processing and adapting ISKCON teachings on Russian ground, offering a variety of visions of what the Russian tradition means, or figuring out the implications of behavioral strategies and practices suggested by these discourses. Vedic Wisdom also functions as a site for negotiating some burning questions of today, from gender inequality to political involvement. The online discussion of Vedic Femininity is one example. Over the past decade, Vedic Femininity went from being elaborated on by its proponents to being challenged by psychologists, journalists, feminist bloggers, and lapsed Vedic women, all of whom express concerns about the consequences of embracing gender stereotypes promoted by the teaching. These conversations are highly local, and it is precisely because of that that they can enrich contemporary feminist discourse in Russia, which is highly influenced by the language of North American popular feminism. Vedic Femininity is an “intensely local” (McLaughlin 1996: 6) issue that is being theorized on the ground, and it can yield pragmatically useful and theoretically profound insights into the workings of contemporary gender traditionalism.

The scope of my project restricted me to a few case studies, but the phenomenon of Vedic Wisdom as a vernacular belief tradition and a discursive node invites further investigations. The question of vernacular theorizing is one

fascinating direction into which this research can be taken. It would be also useful to follow in more detail how Vedic Wisdom continues to shape people's lives over time: their habitus, affective landscapes and horizons of possibilities. This project provides some brief glimpses into the thoughts and experiences of individuals who have found meaning in this tradition. It is my hope that the following articles convey the complexity, creativity and depth of their contributions to the task of understanding Vedic Wisdom.

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## SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

### **Veedade tarkuse otsinguil: alternatiivne vaimsus tänapäeva Venemaal**

Tänapäeva Venemaa sotsiaalses õhkkonnas pole alternatiivne vaimsus kuigivõrd soositud. Kuna sedalaadi liikumised on seaduse silmis „ajalooliste religioonidega“ võrreldes teisejärgulised, põhjustavad nad sageli poleemikat ja ajakirjanduslikku sulesõda. Ometi on alternatiivne vaimsus tänapäeva Venemaal üllatavalt elujõuline. Näiteks on Veedade tarkus tugevasti mõjutanud rahvapärast psühholoogiat. Kuidas seletada selle nähtuse ja alternatiivse vaimsuse vastupidavust sellises vaenulikus keskkonnas?

Venemaa alternatiivse vaimsuse uurijad käsitlevad neid küsimusi tavaliselt suures plaanis: kas riigis toimunud üldiste religioossete muutuste kontekstis või siis üksikutes liikumistes toimuvaid muutusi analüüsis. Väidan, et alternatiivse vaimsuse paremaks mõistmiseks on vajalik kolmas vaatepunkt, mis peab silmas miljöösisesid vastastikuseid mõjutusi ja lõimumisi.

Käesolevas uurimuses arendangi sellist vaatepunkti ja keskendun Veedade tarkusele: rahvapärases usundilises traditsioonis eksisteerivale mitmetahulisele kontseptsioonile, mida järgivad erinevad kogukonnad. Näitan, et Veedade tarkus peegeldab ühtviisi alternatiivse vaimsuse paindlikkust ja sisemist mitmekesisust, kui ka Venemaa kaasaegse spirituaalse maastiku dünaamikat. Uurimistöö on kaks eesmärki. Esimene neist püüab avada Veedade tarkuse kontseptsiooni enamlevinud tähendusi ning selle termini kasutamise üksikasju: teisisõnu seda, mida mõiste tähendab ja kuidas seda kasutatakse. Teine eesmärk on seletada alternatiivse spirituaalsuse paradoksaalset paindlikkust ning luua üldistavaid sissevaateid 21. sajandi vaimsuse funktsioneerimisse nii Venemaal kui globaalses kontekstis.

Uurimistöö rajaneb traditsiooniliste ning virtuaalsete vahenditega tehtud etnograafial, mis on läbi viidud ajavahemikul 2012–2019. Selles on kombineeritud osalusvaatlust, intervjuusid ning digitaalset etnograafia meetodeid. Analüüsis Veedade tarkust kui rahvapärast usundilist traditsiooni, toetub mu uurimus folkloristika tavapärastele teemadele traditsiooni muutumise, rahvausundi, usundiliste žanride, festivalide ja huumori valdkonnas. Et erinevaid teemasid selles uurimuses läbi valgustada ning esile tõsta, olen kasutanud ka religiooniteaduste kontseptsioone (uue vaimsuse ja spirituaalse tõe legitimeerimise vallas tehtud uurimusi), samuti meediauuringute (internetimeemid ning nende poliitiline kasutamine) ning kultuuriteaduste kontseptsioone (minakujundamise praktikad ja neoliberaalne kultuur).

Veedade tarkuse õpetuse sisu mõistmiseks tuleb arvesse võtta selle mitmetahulisust. Veedade tarkus pole ühtne õpetus, vaid diskursiivne kogum ja rahvausundiline traditsioon, mis tõuseb Venemaa alternatiivse vaimsuse miljöös selgelt esile. Õpetust väärtustatakse väga erinevates grupeeringutes ning see toetub väga erinevatele allikatele Bhagavad Gitast John Gray raamatuni „Mehed on Marsilt,

naised Veenuselt“. Väitekirjas kirjeldan kolme kõige mõjukamat mõttevoolu: uushinduistlikud õpetused, slaavimõjutuslik spirituaalne teemadering ning rahvapärane psühholoogia, mis keskendub traditsioonilistele soorollidele, keskkonnahoidlikule ja holistlikule eluviisile. See mitmekesisus põhjustab mõne järgija jaoks segadust, ent teistele tõestab see nende väärtuste universaalsust ning kehtivust.

Neid erinevaid seisukohti analüüsid täidan oma töö teist eesmärki, et näidata, kuidas Veedade tarkus funktsioneerib. Selleks, et analüüsida diskursiivse kogumi sisemisi toimemehhanisme, analüüsin, kuidas seda vaimsetel kogunemistel, veebigrüpeeriingutes, inimeste igapäevaeludes ja ka töisel alal väljendatakse. Traditsioon kõnetab erinevaid inimesi: nii vaimseid otsijaid, keskkonnaaktiviste, psühholoogiahuvilistest lugejaid kui ka erinevaid kritiseerijaid valitsuse esindajatest feministlike aktivistideni. Käesolevas uurimuses sisalduvad lood peegeldavad seda, kuidas erinevad osapooled oma tõekspidamiste üle arutlevad, neid õigustavad, nende üle vaidlevad, kasutades erinevaid diskursiivseid vahendeid, millest moodustub Veedade tarkuse traditsioon. Analüüsis avanevad diskursuse erinevad ristumispunktid, pinged ja arutelud, kus Veedade õpetuse vastuolulised allikad tekitavad mõnel puhul probleemi, mõnel puhul saavad aga vastupidi loovaks tõukejõuks.

Teise uurimisülesandena analüüsin, kuidas Veedade tarkuse õpetus paigutub laiemal uue vaimsuse väljal, milline on selle koht Venemaa ühiskonnas ja millised on selle mõjud laiemas kultuurilooikas. Et selgitada uusvaimsete liikumiste nagu ISKCON olemasolu ning suhtelist populaarsust, arutlen mõningate faktorite üle, mis toetavad õpetuse populaarsust kaasaegse Venemaa ühiskonnas (täpsemat selle üle, kuidas kõlavad kokku liikumise strateegila ja Venemaa ametlik kultuuri poliitika, mis toetab traditsioonilistele soorollidele põhinevaid väärtusi), samuti näitan, kuidas Veedade tarkust mõjutavad globaalsed nähtused nagu sotsiaalmeedia ja neoliberaalne vastutustundlikkust rõhutav ideoloogia.

Viimaks väidan, et alternatiivne vaimsus ei sea oma tingimustelt alati piire inimeste väljendusvõimalustele, vaid sisaldab endas loovat lubavust. Vaatamata piiravatele põhimõtetele ja neoliberaalse subjektivismi üldkehtivusele, leidub vaimse arengu stsenaariumides nii individuaalseid valikuid kui võimalusi ühendavateks rahvateoreetilisteks (*vernacular theorizing*) aruteludeks. Spirituaalne intelligentsus tähendab isiklikku info ja kogemuste kogumise protsessi, mis kujundab inimeste eluviisi, püüdlusi ning laiemat tähendusloomet. Oma välitöödel olen jälginud, kuidas Veedade tarkus selles protsessis oma rolli mängib. Mõne inimese jaoks on õpetuse tähendus aja jooksul muutunud seoses teiste vaimsete õpetuste avastamise ja praktiseerimisega. Teised on valinud spetsiifilise tee, näiteks vaišnava ökokogukonna, ning kujundanud oma elu vastavalt sellele. Lõpuks on ka inimesi, kelle jaoks Veedade õpetuse sisu on jäänud samaks, ent nad ise on aja jooksul muutunud nii, et põhimõtted, mis kunagi olulised tundusid, on nüüd hüljatud.

Inimeste isiklike valikuid ning spirituaalse intelligentsuse arenguid mõjutavad kahtlemata ka laiemad rahvateoreetilised arutelud. Samal ajal kui vaimne areng tähendab oma isikliku teekonna taju, käsitlevad need teoreetilised deba

vaimsuse põhimõtteid ja selle rolli laiemas maailmas. Veedade tarkuste kogukondades arutletakse ISKCONi Venemaa diskursuses levivaid tõekspidamiste üle ning pakutakse erinevaid versioone, kuidas neid põhimõtteid vene traditsioonis rakendada, millised oleks sobilikud käitumisnormid ning praktikad. Selles keskkonnas mõeldakse ka kaasaja põletavamatele probleemidele nagu sugudevaheline ebavõrdsus ning poliitiline kaasatus. Heaks näiteks on siin veedaliku feminiinsuse veebidiskursus. Viimase kümnendi jooksul on see varem suure järgijaskonnaga vaimne liikumine muutunud psühholoogide, ajakirjanike, feministlike blogijate ja varasemate liikmete poolt analüüsitavaks nähtuseks, mille käigus väljendatakse muret soostereotüüpide pärast, mida see õpetus propageerib. Need debatid on lokaalse levikuga ja peamiselt selle tõttu saavad need rikastada Venemaa feministlikku diskursust, mida oluliselt mõjutab Põhja-Ameerika populaarse feminismi terminoloogia ja keel. Selle tõttu tundubki, et veedaliku feminiinsuse teemaderingi raames toimuvad igapäevased mõtiskelud traditsionalismi üle soorollides, mida jälgides võib teha pragmaatilist kasulikku ning teoreetiliselt sügavaid üldistusi.

Veedade tarkuse õpetuse raames toimuvate rahvateoreetiliste arutelude jälgimine on uurimistöö üks võimalikke võimalikke suundi. Lisaks oleks huvitav lähemalt analüüsida, kuidas diskursiivsed ristumispunktid saavad aja jooksul nähtavaks inimeste läbielamistes, kogemustes, kuidas need eluviisis, tajumaastikes, unistustes ja eesmärkides väljenduvad. Minu uurimistöö piirdub mõne juhtumianalüüsiga, ent loodan, et see annab oma panuse Veedade tarkuse kui usundilise traditsiooni ja diskursiivse sõlmpunkti edasisse analüüsi.

## **1. artikkel: Uusvaimsuse paradoks: spirituaalne konsumerism ja traditsiooni võim Venemaa Looduslapse festivalil**

Artikkel analüüsib uue vaimsuse üht paradoksi, milles ristuvad kapitalistliku turumajanduse individualistlik ideoloogia ja traditsioonilisele tõele osutavad väärtushinnangud. See seisukoht toetub uut vaimsust kandvale alusveendumusele, et eksisteerib universaalne Tõde selle mitmekesisest väljendustes. Väidan, et seda paradoksi selgitab kultuuridevahelisest etnograafiast pärinev rahvausundi kontseptsioon. Kui vaadelda uut vaimsust läbi elatud inimkogemusena, saab seda kirjeldada dünaamilise ja mitmekesise praktikakogumina, millest ei saa otsida ideoloogilist ühtlust. Analüüsides Peterburi festivali ideoloogilist mitmekesisust, näitab artikkel seda, kuidas festivali külastajad liiguvad vastandlike narratiivide vahel, mis kohtuvad universaalse tõe narratiivis Veedade tarkuse termini all.

Looduslapse festivalil pakutakse Veedade tarkust nii tootena uusvaimsel turul kui ka universaalset tõde kandva õpetusena, mida esindavad ja interpreteerivad kaks erinevat traditsiooni, millest üks on slaavimõjuline ja teine hinduismimõjuline. Üheltpoolt toetab uue vaimsuse festival individualismi ja pluralismi. Teisalt toetab selle ideoloogia sisemine püüdlus asjade olemuseni jõudmiseks tugevat veendumust ühtse tõe eksisteerimise kohta. Festivali osalejad loovad erinevaid käitumisstrateegiaid, et seda paradoksi lahendada. Et arutelu tõe üle edasi

viia, kontrollitakse teiste väljaütlemisi, väjendatakse enda arvamust ning osaletakse debatis. Tulemuseks on pidev arutelu: tõestamine, põhjendamine ja autoriteediloomine. Samal ajal eeldab uusvaimne festival erinevate inimeste vahelist koostööd ja koosloomeprotsessi. Lõpuks tähendab see ideoloogiline ebastabiilsus seda, et festival saab mängulise ja loova näo. Osalejad järgivad oma isiklikke vaimseid teeradu luues tähenduslikke narratiive ja kogemusi. Konfliktsete ja kattuvate tõekuulutuste kaoses ilmuvad humoorikad lahendused, mis kasutavad sõnamänge.

## **2. artikkel: Huumor ja vastupanu Venemaa ökoloogilises utopias (vaade Anastasia liikumisele)**

Vaimsed liikumised, mille eesmärgiks on alternatiivse ja majanduslikest struktuuridest sõltumatu maailma loomine siin ja praegu, on ühtlasi vastukultuuri eredamateks näideteks. Samal ajal loovad need vastukultuuri rühmitused enesele iseseisvad autoriteedistruktuurid, mille eesmärgiks on hõlmata inimeste tegevused laiema tõe katuse alla. See tendents, mille püüdluseks on luua hierarhia ja autoriteedistruktuur institutsionaliseeritud vaimsetesse liikumistesse, on Paul Heelase sõnul üks uue vaimseuse olulisimaid väljakutseid, mida ta nimetab ise-seiva vaimse Mina eetikaks. Isiklikul tasandil on loogiline kuulata oma sisemise mina häält. Siiski on sotsiaalse toimimise aluseks inimese suhted välismaailmaga ja selle autoriteedistruktuuridega (Heelas 1996: 213). Selleks, et oma maailma koos hoida, peab inimene leidma tasakaalu iseseisvast Minast lähtuva eetika ja kogukonnaelu nõuete vahel (Heelas 1996: 216). Kuidas seda saavutatakse?

Peatükk avab naljade ja paroodiate rolli minavaimsus järgivate grupeeringute autoriteediloomes protsessis. Selle aineks on maale tagasi ideoloogiat järgivate inimeste kogukonnad, mis on saanud inspiratsiooni raamatusarjast „Venemaa helisevad seedrid”. Varem ärimehena tegutsenud autori Vladimir Megre raamatud väljendavad veendumust, et inimsivilisatsiooni allakäiku saab peatada sellega, kui kõik inimesed pöörduvad tagasi Maa poole ja võtavad omaks eneseküllase ja vaimse elulaadi. Raamatud on saanud bestselleriteks niihästi Venemaa uusvaimsel kirjandusturul kui tõlgitud paljudesse keeltesse. Samuti on need andnud tõe ökoloogilist vaimsus järgiva Anastasia liikumise väljakujunemiseks (vt Megre 1996, 2003, 2005, 2008).

Peatükk selgitab, kuidas autoriteediga seotud küsimused põhjustavad kogukonna liikmete jaoks probleeme, mis takistavad Anastasia põhimõtete ellurakendamist. Analüüsides Anastasia kogukonnas levivaid nalju ja paroodiaid, näitan, kuidas huumori kaudu väljendatakse omavahelist toetust, esitatakse väljakutseid ja luuakse loovaid lahendusi autoriteedi ja seda kujundava ideoloogia vahel.

### **3. artikkel: Õigustades uut vaimsust kaasaegsel Venemaal: Veedade tarkus tule all**

Oleg Torsunov, Venemaa alternatiivsete tervisepraktikate- ja elustiiliguuru, naiselikkuse ekspert ja Veedade tarkuse õpetuse levitaja, leidis 2010. aastatel end keset konflikti: teda kritiseerisid nii Venemaa Õigeusu Kirik, uushinduistliku kultuse kriitikud, feministlikud blogijad, psühholoogid, pettunud patsiendid, uudishimulikud jälgijad ja Venemaa Krišna Teadvuse Ühingu Keskuse Rahvuslik Nõukogu. Teda piiras vaimsete õpetuste kogu spekter ja nii sai see viljaka tegevusega mees Venemaa gurude seas ühtaegu nii ainulaadseks kui ka tüüpiliseks näiteks. Tema järjepidev, ehkki konfliktne avalik roll mitmekesisstab pilti Venemaa vaimsest maastikust.

Veedade tarkuse eksperdina peab Torsunov oma ülesandeks selle spirituaalse õpetuse ümbertõlkimist Venemaa tingimustesse. Ta ületab eri religioonide piire, kasutab uusvaimseid õpetusi ja rahvapsühholoogiat, et levitada isikliku arengu ideoloogiat. Seda tehes viitab ta India traditsioonidele, Krišna teadvuse õpetustele, Ameerika eneseabikirjandusele nagu John Gray “Mehed on Marsilt, naised Veenuselt” (1992). Torsunovi meditsiinitegevus hõlmab nii rahvapäraseid soovitusi holistliku elustiili järgimiseks kui ekstravagantseid meedodeid nagu ravimine puukoorega.

Kaasaegse Venemaa poliitilises ja kultusvastases kontekstis peaks ta oma eklektiliste ja ebatraditsiooniliste allikate tõttu olema kahtlane isik. Olukord on aga vastupidine, tema õpetused on olnud populaarsed, saanud peavoolumeedia positiivset tähelepanu, tal on tuhandeid online-jälgijaid, samal ajal meelitab ta ka uudishimulikke kriitikuid erinevatelt huvialadelt.

Torsunov alustas oma õpetustega 1990ndate üleminekuajal, kui ateistlikust Nõukogude riigist sai enneolematu religioosse vabadusega koht, kus välismaised ja kodumaised vaimsed liikumised said avalikult õitseda. Siiski muutis riik 2000ndatel seadusandlust nii, et see marginaliseeris „mittetraditsioonilisi” religioosseid õpetusi. Samal ajal hakati nii rahvusvahelises kui kohalikus meedias propageerima Venemaa uustraditsionalistlikku kuvandit, mis on vaenulik kõige eristuva suhtes.

Olgugi, et see protsess on nii juriidilises kui sotsioloogilises mõttes tõele vastav, on siingi vajalik nüansseeritud vaade, kasvõi selle tõttu, et uus vaimsus eksisteerib ja on Venemaal endiselt populaarne. Artikkel püüab selgitada, kuidas alternatiivse vaimse vastuolulised vormid eksisteerivad Venemaa avalikus ruumis, kus justkui domineerib Vene Õigeusu Kirik ja teised traditsioonilisteks peetavad religioonid. Et mõista Venemaa alternatiivse vaimse paradoksaalset paidlikkust, kaardistan pingelist diskursiivset maastikku nõukogudejärgse Venemaa ühe guru ümber, analüüsides Torsunovi ja tema vastaste retoorilisi strateegiaid, mis kord kaitsevad, kord ründavad.

Miks tundub Torsunovi-sarnane avaliku elu tegelane kõigutamatu vastuolulisele ja isegi vaenulikule kultuurilisele keskkonnale vaatamata? Saladus peitub tema viisis oma õpetust põhjendada. Toetun James R. Lewise (2010) väitele, et religioossete riikumiste legitiimsus rajaneb paindlikel konteksti arvestavatel

strateegiatel ning näitan, et need strateegiad toimivad kompleksina, mida võib ruumis ette kujutada justkui võrena. Kui võre iseenesest moodustub ristuvatest kiirtest, siis „põhjenduste võre” struktuuri moodustavad erinevad autoriteetsed allikad. See lähenemine lubab kasutajal neid allikaid kombineerida ja liikuda paindlikult nende vahel, kohandades oma retoorikat nii, et õpetus tunduks kõitev ja veenev. Sellel lähenemisel on ka oma vajupool: kuna autoriteetseid allikad on nii erinevad, siis terve struktuur langeb kergesti erinevate kriitikute ründe alla. Artiklis esitatud legitimeerimismudel aitab paremini mõista nii nõukogudejärgset religioosset maastikku, kui ka laiemalt enesearengu-superstaari fenomeni tõejärgsel ajastul.

Torsunovi ümber pöörlevad vastuolud on osalt kattuvad, osalt eri teemasid hõlmavad. Kriitikute arutelud tema religioosse kuuluvuse, teadusliku tõepära, Krišna õpetustele vastavuse ja sooideoloogia üle on loonud võrratu tekstivaramu: isiklikest tunnistustest sanskriti tekstide lähilugemiseni, aruteludest vaimuse üle juriidiliste analüüsideni. Rasketele süüdistustele ja naeruvääristavatele kampaniatele vaatamata pole Torsunovi populaarsus oluliselt kahjustada saanud. Vastupidi, see vaidlus toidab sotsiaalseid ja eksistentsiaalseid küsimusi käsitlevaid rahvapäraseid teooriaid: spirituaalsuse psühholoogiline maaletoomine, teaduse olemus ja selle piirid, nõukogudejärgne religioosne maastik, eneseabi-õpetuste kasulikkus ja soorollide tähendus.

Artikkel põhineb Torsunovi kirjutiste, loengute ja reklaammaterjalide (2003–2018) ning internetis ja meedias tema tööde üle peetavate arutelude analüüsil. Analüüsi taustaks on minu etnograafiline uurimus Veedade tarkuse õpetuse diskursusest kaasaegse Venemaa uusvaimses miljöös, samuti intervjuud veedaliku feminiinsuse järgijatega.

#### **4. artikkel: Maapealse Paradiisi president: Putini meemid ja nägemus rahvusest**

Kergesti paljundatavad ja kiiresti levivad meemid on eriti heaks vahendiks, et levitada rahvuslikke ideid, väljendada rahulolematust ja aidata kaasa poliitilistele muutustele. Kiiresti levivate digitaalselt kujundatud piltide poliitilist potentsiaali on analüüsitud kultuuriteaduste, meediaanalüüsi kui ka folkloristika vahenditega. Olgugi, et uurijad on mõistnud meemide loovat ja iroonilist olemust, keskendub suurem hulk analüüse väikesele, ent aktuaalsele teemaderingile: allasurumine, vastupidamine ja katkestus. Analüüsides võimu ja vastupanu keelalisi vahendeid näidatakse, kuidas inimesed meemide abil poliitikaga tegelevad, ent samal jääb analüüsides varju poliitiliste seisukohtade väljendamise digitaalne mitmekesisus ja ambivalentsus.

Võimu ja vastupanu raamistiku esilekerkimine on Venemaa poliitilistele debattidele harjumuspäraselt omane. Viraalselt levivad Putini meemid on ses osas heaks näiteks: ametlikud fotod palja ülakehaga Putini maskuliinsetest tegevustest kujutavad jõulist ja uuenevat rahvust, samal ajal pilavad internetimeemid neid pilte ja kritiseerivad Venemaa poliitikat. Ehkki Putini meemid esindavad seda

modelit, muudavad nad seda ühtlasi keerukamaks. Uurijad näitavad, et putinianas segunevad propaganda ja satiiri vahendid. Et seda vastuolu paremini mõista, analüüsin, millistes funktsioonides on Putini meemid väljaspool võimu ja vastupanu raamistikku. Väidan, et on oluline uurida poliitilisi meeme nende esilekerkimise ja kasutamise kontekstides.

Artikkel annab esmalt ülevaate meemidest kultuuriuuringute kontekstis, samuti uurimistöödest, mis analüüsivad Vladimir Putini visuaalset kujutamist. Ühelt poolt õnestavad Putini meemid ametlike fotode autoriteeti ja pakuvad nõnda vastupanu võimalust valitsuse ametlikele sõnumitele. Samal ajal näitavad analüüsid ikka ja jälle, et ametlikud ja mitteametlikud kuvandid Putinist väljendavad pigem järjepidevust kui vastandamist. Ametliku ja mitteametliku pildikeele vastandmõjud ulatuvad ka piltide tähendustesse: valitsuse poolt või vastu olemist, positiivselt ja negatiivselt meelestatud meeme on tihti raske eristada. Enamik on nendest siiski samal ajal nii otsekohesed kui eneseteadlikud. Tulemuseks on visuaalne ironia, mis viitab Venemaa poliitilise elu hälbivatele aspektidele ning poliitilise osaluse paradoksaalsele loomusele.

Mitteametlike meemide, satiiri ja kriitika sarnasus, mida samal ajal väljendavad nii uurijad kui ka meedia, ei kinnita nende poliitilist rolli. See ei tähenda veel, et meemid oleks tingimata apoliitilised, vaid et kõik kultuurižanrid töötavad komplekselt. Et mõista, kuidas meeme poliitiliselt kasutatakse, peame vaatlema neid nende kontekstides.

Selles artiklis analüüsin suhteliselt segast Putini meemide liiki, mis esineb väljaspool valitsuse pooldajate ja kriitikute tegevusvälja, väljaspool seda, mis pälvib enamasti uurijate ja ajakirjanike tähelepanu. Selle loojateks on ökovaimuse järgijad Venemaa Helisevate seedrite kogukonnast ning visuaalne keel, mida nad kasutavad, väljendab liikumise rahvuse ja tuleviku visiooni. Veelgi enam, nende meemide eesmärgiks on reaalsuse muutmise mõtte jõul. Putini meemid toetavad nägemust Venemaa kindlast tulevikust, samuti aitavad kaasa üldisele fundamentaalsele muutusele tsivilisatsiooni arengus. Interneti huumori ironilisest loomusest erinevalt püüavad need meemid muuta väljakujunenud olukorda mõtte jõuga.

Helisevate seedrite meemid haakuvad laiema poliitilise süsteemiga, kuna need juhinduvad presidendi kuvandi olemasolevatest tähendustest. Nad toetavad valitsuse suhtekorralduslikku strateegiat, toites omalt poolt seda kindlate tähenduste ja spetsiifilise poliitilise visiooniga. See, mis tundub kõrvaltvaatajatele ja skeptikutele veider ja ebafektiivne, on aga meemide loojate jaoks vastupidi, mõjus viis poliitiliseks eneseväljenduseks. Anastasia järgijad ei soovi poliitikas osaleda traditsioonilisel viisil, vaid mõjutada seda alternatiivsete vahendite kaudu.

Analüüsides seda poliitilist osalemisviisi, mida need meemid esindavad, väidan, et on oluline uurida meeme nende esinemiskontekstis ning märgata neis erinevaid poliitilisi sõnumeid.

## **PUBLICATIONS**

## CURRICULUM VITAE

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### Publications:

2021 Legitimizing New Religiosity in Contemporary Russia: “Vedic Wisdom” Under Fire. *Nova Religio* 24 (4). 39 pages. Forthcoming.  
2020 The President in Earthly Paradise: Putin Memes and Political Agency. *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*. 23 typescript pages. Abstract accepted. In review.  
2021 Humour and Resistance in Russia’s Ecological Utopia (A Look at the Anastasia Movement). Ülo Valk and Marion Bowman (eds.), *Contesting Authority: Vernacular Knowledge and Alternative Beliefs*. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing. 28 pages. Forthcoming.  
2017 The New Age Paradox: Spiritual Consumerism and Traditional Authority at the Child of Nature Festival in Russia. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32 (1): 83–103.

## ELULOOKIRJELDUS

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2021 Legitimizing New Religiosity in Contemporary Russia: “Vedic Wisdom” Under Fire. *Nova Religio* 24 (4). 39 lk. Ilmumas.  
2020 The President in Earthly Paradise: Putin Memes and Political Agency. *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*. 23 masinakirjas lk. Teesid vastu võetud, retsenseerimisel.  
2021 Humour and Resistance in Russia’s Ecological Utopia (A Look at the Anastasia Movement). Ülo Valk and Marion Bowman (eds.), *Contesting Authority: Vernacular Knowledge and Alternative Beliefs*. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing. 28 lk. Ilmumas.  
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