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The appropriation of a religion: The case of Zoroastrianism in contemporary Russia

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This paper distinguishes between the (ontological) creation, (historical) emergence and (legal) ‘making’ of religion. Many religions claim plausibility by invoking long chains of (invented) traditions, while some post-modern religions positively affirm their invented character. The case of Zoroastrianism in contemporary Russia is discussed as an example of a cross-cultural ‘appropriation’ of religion, rather than a transfer of an extant religion through, for example, migration. This means that inventors, recipients and practitioners mimetically reconstruct ‘Zoroastrianism’, by adapting it to the (new) legal framework that regulates religion in Russia. Once Zoroastrianism had affirmed its presence in Russia, Zoroastrians from other parts of the world established contacts. In the course of events, Russian Zoroastrianism diversified into different tendencies (esoteric, charismatic and nativistic vs modernistic, Internet-based and international). In addition to functioning as a separate religion, Zoroastrianism in Russia has become part of Neopagan and New Age complexes and is appropriated inter-discursively in the academy, the mass media and in different genres of fiction.

Keywords: appropriation of religion; astrology; Internet and religion; *perestroika*; religion in contemporary Russia; Zoroastrianism

The creation and emergence of religion

On an ontological level, religions are not brute facts ‘out there’. Religions share in the making of social reality that is premised on human intentionality and language, and thereby also on cognitive and evolutionary mechanisms that have shaped the human mind throughout history. Intentionality and language have transformative powers that can change the status of things to make them count as something more than what mere physical appearance reveals at first sight; a piece of printed paper is treated as money, and a painting counts as a deity. Such status, once it is declared and represented accordingly, entails ‘deontic’ relationships such as duties, obligations, rights and expectations. The status that makes things count as something X can also be challenged; notes/money can become worthless and gods can be dismissed or turned into heritage objects stored in a museum.

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Their social and objective status remains intentionality-dependent (Searle 2010; Stausberg 2010, 364–69). In this sense (and that includes its materiality), religions are social realities that are constantly created and recreated. This elementary creation of religion needs to be learned, reproduced and transmitted (Stausberg 2001).

On a historical level, all religious groups and traditions have emerged at some point in space and time, be it as a result of fabrication or drift, in given cultural and ecological contexts. Everywhere and at all times, religious creativity has resulted in variations, mutations, change and transformation, or other forms of reinvention. From a certain point onwards, increasingly large parts of the globe became dominated by varieties of what some of us, popular critiques notwithstanding, still call ‘world religions’; in these areas and eras, the occurrence of micro- and macro-scale religious innovations were then channelled and negotiated within these frameworks as currents, movements, sects, schools and the like. It was only since the modern age that religious groups started to appear that once again programmatically sever the ties to contextually dominant religious traditions: in other words, the self-declared formation of new religions claiming to operate beyond the orbit of the contextually determined dominant religious traditions, that wished to be acknowledged as something other than deviant, sectarian or non-conformist forms of these prior religions.

The ‘invention of tradition’ and the ‘invention of invention’

Characteristically, religions make attributions involving narratives of superhuman or transcendental origins. In addition, to provide authenticity, plausibility and legitimacy to these claims, ‘most religions also present narratives which explain how the doctrines and practices revealed to the first human recipients have been passed down from them to the present day’ (Hammer and Lewis 2007, 3). If these ‘recipients’ are contemporary persons, such claims are often made plausible by aligning them to arguably legitimate sources of knowledge. Main sources for, and strategies of, such arguments include derivation from tradition, compatibility with science, and sometimes inspiration from the arts and literature.

In the case of tradition, two main types are autochthony and allochthony, that is, the claimed derivation from sources and traditions originating from the same geographical area (autochthony) or from sources and traditions originating elsewhere (allochthony), i.e. a cross-cultural appropriation of alleged prestigious centres of advanced knowledge. In both cases, this strategy amounts to an invention of tradition. As masterfully illustrated by Hammer ([2001] 2004), the so-called ‘New Age Movement’ is an example of these strategies of invention occurring beyond the realm of organised religions.

More recently, Cusack (2010) has pointed to the invention of some religions (such as the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster) whose creators avoid the aforementioned strategies of invention of tradition, but deliberately, and sometimes with an air of parody, admit the invented status of their claims as

products of their own imagination, or as inspired by works of fiction, rather than being derived from some kind of tradition. To highlight the reflexivity of this approach, one can refer to this new rhetoric as the 'invention of invention'. While the 'invention of tradition' strategy is a typically modern one, as demonstrated in the seminal publication by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), the 'invention of invention' strategy is a post-modern and a post-secular one. When emerging in contexts where Christianity has a major societal presence, both strategies of religious invention are para- or post-Christian: that is, they emerge in parallel to Christianity, or in the space left vacant by the demise of its societal dominance.

The appropriation of (a) religion

In the main part of this paper, we will examine one case of the cross-cultural invention of tradition, which we call the appropriation of (a) religion, that is, the process and result of making a different/foreign religion one's own (see further below). This process is mimetic, meaning that it refers to worlds already created by others, which are assimilated by acts of imitation-cum-variation that indicate both sameness and difference (and must not be confused with mimicry). Appropriating an allochthonous religion presupposes its translation into a new context by subjects who do not belong to the religion in its space of provenience; this distinguishes it from the transplantation of religion (Pye 1969) through processes such as migration or diaspora. The appropriation of an allochthonous religion also can entail its deliberate demarcation as 'religion'. In our case, the allochthonous origin is mitigated by nativising strategies, which distinguishes it from exoticising appropriation. In the former case of nativisation, the appropriated 'foreign' religion is presented as (its apparent foreignness notwithstanding) partly deriving from one's own cultural sphere, typically in terms of a denied and recovered continuity. In the latter case of exoticism, the 'foreign' origin of the appropriated religion is part of its claimed or perceived attractiveness. In some cases, as in our Zoroastrian example, both strategies coexist.

Regulating religion in Russia

What we classify as 'religions' encompasses a cluster of semantic units, which can also be appropriated independently of the specifically religious frame; the name Zoroaster, for example, has in early modern European history been engaged in a multitude of discursive contexts, but this does not mean that Zoroastrianism has become a European religion (Stausberg 1998). Accordingly, in the final part of the paper, we will look at other modes of discursive transfers of semantic inventories.

Our case study of the cross-cultural appropriation of Zoroastrianism in contemporary Russia is both post-Christian and post-secular in a very specific sense. To understand this requires some brief historical background. While

religious diversity and plurality were extant to a certain extent in Russia, the religious policy of the Tsarist Empire endorsed a programme of Christianisation (and Russification) and fought against religious non-conformism (Geraci and Khodarkovsky 2001). After the Bolshevik Revolution, the principle of separation of state and church was introduced in 1918. The Soviet Union was committed to the ideological goal of the elimination of religion and there were two major antireligious campaigns in Soviet history (1929–1939 and 1959–1964; see Walters 1993), but the degree of religious decline as a result of atheist state politics remains unclear and at both the individual and institutional levels religion was never totally uprooted.

In the context of the political reforms of the late 1980s, including the lifting of the Iron Curtain, in 1990 a law *On Freedom of Religion* was passed that defined religion as an inalienable individual right and granted free mission and equal juridical rights to every religion. In 1997, backed by the Russian Orthodox Church in conjunction with secular nationalists and anti-cult networks, a new law *On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations* was passed (Shterin 2000, 201ff; Richardson and Shterin 2008, 258ff). This law reaffirmed the freedom of conscience and freedom of creed, and the separation of church and state, but qualified the legal regulation of religion in important ways by adding several provisions such as the following: religious organisations can only be founded by Russian citizens (amounting to an ethnification of religion); such groups or organisations must have a religious purpose defined in terms of creed, worship and education (amounting to the adoption and perpetuation of a specific model of 'religion'); to qualify as a religious organisation, they must have already been in existence, as confirmed by a local body of administration, for at least 15 years in any given territory, unless they can claim to be affiliated with an already recognised association, resulting in a test-phase, or limbo, during which its range of activities are severely restricted with regard to public worship, the distribution of materials and the hiring of foreign specialists; finally, the law stipulates conditions under which the state is entitled to dissolve religious organisations.

The law *On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations* ascribes national pre-eminence to Orthodox Christianity because of its alleged fundamental importance for the history and culture of Russia, but the law also professes respect for 'Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and other religions which constitute an inseparable part of the historical heritage of Russia's peoples'.¹ Zoroastrianism is not mentioned here, and from a historian's perspective it would seem that Zoroastrianism is an unlikely candidate for that kind of significance in Russia, since Zoroastrians did not have an undisputed historical presence on Russian soil.

Arguably one of the oldest religious traditions, Zoroastrianism played a major role in pre-Islamic Iran and had a significant impact on adjacent cultures. For the past millennium or so, until the modern era, Zoroastrianism existed as a set of marginal(ised) ethnic communities in central Iran and on the Indian West coast (Stausberg 2002). Through their involvement in colonial trading networks in the late eighteenth century, Zoroastrians settled in various countries in Asia, Africa,

America and Europe (Hinnells 2005), but not in Russia. Given that (ethnic) Zoroastrianism is not a proselytising faith, no Zoroastrian missionaries were active in Russia. Nevertheless, Zoroastrianism emerged as a religious option, a public entity that can be chosen by individuals in Russia in the 1990s, in the context of post-*perestroika*. In the following sections, we describe some stages of its appropriation and emergence. We will first look at the making of Zoroastrianism as a religion and then turn to discursive involvements of Zoroastrianism beyond the category and realm of 'religion' or specifically 'religious' discourses.

From astrology to religion

As in Western Europe and North America, during the 1960s and 1970s the Soviet Union saw the emergence of a non-conformist urban subculture and a new 'cultic milieu' (Campbell 1972) including traditionalist Orthodox groups as much as esoteric currents. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, some of these subcultural movements could operate in public and some were highlighted in the post-Soviet mass media. Our case study is a good example of this process.

The main protagonist of our story is Pavel Globa (b. 1953), who emerged as a 'pop-star-astrologer' in the 1990s. According to an interview conducted by Anna Tessmann with Globa and one of his former wives in Berlin in 2003, he became an astrology teacher as a young history graduate in Moscow in the early 1980s (Tessmann 2005, 60), whereas early interviews with Globa in the press state that he started to teach 'practical astrology' in small groups in 1979 (Kanevskaja 1990). One of his oldest students dated those meetings back to 1982 (Tarasova 2000, 41). After these underground beginnings, Globa attempted to reach wider audiences in 1984, but did not succeed until the late 1980s when he and his former wife Tamara Globa (b. 1957) began to give public interviews in the Soviet mass media. Television broadcasting during the *perestroika* period, when religious and esoteric topics gradually began to be addressed in the media, helped him to gain wide popularity. The first television appearance of the Globas was a show on Leningrad TV entitled *The Fifth Wheel* (Пятое колесо) in 1989 (Belyaev 2008, 37), where Globa commented on a film about Nostradamus. In the following years, Globa's popularity increased, his lectures filled larger halls and he was invited (after the couple had separated) to contribute to mainstream journals and radio and TV programmes. During the 1990s, Globa's media image became so popular and influential that he virtually held a monopoly on talking about astrology in the entire post-Soviet area. He appeared conspicuously in many mass media: on concert stages, regional TV and radio programmes, and in the press throughout almost all the former Soviet republics. His charismatic personality and his astrological lectures – garnished with rather speculative excursions into the history of the ancient and modern world – provided the basis for the establishment of a kind of public 'Globa cult'. Globa had become a household name in Russian popular media.

At some point, probably in the years immediately before the demise of the Soviet Union (Tessmann 2005, 61–62), Globa started to declare his astrological system as ‘Avestan’. Even if this is not always communicated in his media appearances, the fact that Globa could draw on a developed system was instrumental in popularising interest in astrology during the post-Soviet era. In fact, almost all current post-Soviet astrologers in their 40s or 50s were Globa’s former students or were influenced by Avestan astrology and Globa’s publications. Since then, the Russian astrological scene has become much more diversified with several systems emerging from diverse non-conventional healing institutions and private astrological schools in major cities in the post-Soviet space.² Regardless of their further activity and positive or negative relationship to their teacher/colleague, many contemporary astrologers recognise Globa’s decisive role for the rise of mass interest in astrology.³ In their opinion, Globa has stimulated the discovery of new avenues in modern Russian ‘astrological research’.

Globa’s ‘Avestan’ astrology is loosely inspired by aspects of Zoroastrian mythology and by eschatological and millenarian constructs transmitted by Avestan and Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts, which were translated in the 1990s by Russian scholars. Also, certain of the planets in Globa’s astrological system (some of which are his own inventions) are given the names of Avestan (Zoroastrian) deities. In a practical sense, Avestan astrology operates as a prognostic therapy in which the dualism of good and evil serves as an important instrument to determine the individual character and the (past, present and future) events in the life of the individual. In a narrative of ‘invention of tradition’, Globa regards himself as the heir of a secret line of esoteric Zoroastrianism from North Western Iran, which venerated the deity of time (Zurvan). Globa claims that his great grandmother was a Zoroastrian from Iran and that he obtained his knowledge of Avestan astrology from his maternal grandfather, Ivan N. Gantimurov, who was a practicing astrologer in the early twentieth century and who established a small Zoroastrian community in St Petersburg, which eventually fell prey to the anti-religious politics of the Bolsheviks.

In the 1980s, Globa and his sympathisers congregated in private flats. Given the official doctrine, these underground gatherings amounted to illegal activity. In the early 1990s, the Avestan design of Globa’s astrological teaching took the organisational shape of the so-called Avestan Schools of Astrology (Авестийские школы астрологии/АША). The chosen acronym ASHA invokes a key notion from the old Avestan texts: the agency of divine order and cosmic harmony. Eventually, ASHAs were founded in many major cities in the post-Soviet space. One informant told Anna Tessmann in 2006 that there have been about 48 such schools. Currently about 20 of them are still in operation. The five largest and most active are in Moscow, St Petersburg, Perm (Russia), Minsk (Belarus) and Kiev (Ukraine). The different schools were unstable in institutional terms. In the long term, it seems that there was a strong decline in attendance. One of the larger ASHAs, the Avestan Association of the Republic of Belarus,

according to its own assessment, experienced a downward swing from about 1000 regular students on astrological courses in 1991 to only about 100 adherents in 2002 (Tessmann 2005, 143). According to one informant, the overall number of people who attended astrological courses in organisations applying Globa's system (between 1989 and 2006) is approximately 30,000 but only some 2000 have continued to learn or practice Avestan astrology. Even these figures may well be at the upper end and the total number of people currently attending the ASHAs, in the most optimistic estimate, amounts to around 1000 people. The ASHAs operate as small commercial ventures; as a rule, their activities are based on demand from anyone who is able to pay for courses or seminars. The active core of the movement are the instructors, who teach the 'certified' courses, produce and sell astrological literature, and also organise Globa's lectures and related events. Since 2002, the network of the ASHAs throughout the post-Soviet space is maintained through the organisation of the so-called International Practical-Scientific Conferences on Avestan Astrology attended by Globa. In addition to courses and events, at least one ASHA also engages in tourism activities.⁴ The Perm ASHA, founded in 1993 (Lushnikov 2000, 30), has arranged an annual 'festival-tour' (тур-фестиваль) since 1996 entitled 'On the Path of Zarathushtra' (Путём Заратуштры) which, for a fee, is open to anyone interested in Zoroastrian 'holy' sites and other tourist destinations in the southern Urals and Eastern Siberia.

The 'Avestan' framework of the astrological discourse at least nominally ties the ASHAs to Zoroastrianism, but this in itself does not amount to the 'making' of Zoroastrianism into a religion in Russia, and many participants are not only attracted to Zoroastrianism but to a whole range of mythological, religious or esoteric motives and themes (see also Panchenko 2004, 126). Nevertheless, Globa's guru-status readily translated into religious modes of identification. For example, Globa conducted 'initiations', first in private spaces and then on stage, at the end of his lectures. These initiations were once again inspired by Zoroastrianism, but with some changes. The mode of appropriation is mimetic, that is, involving elements of imitation without claiming to be exact copies. One change involves the choice of colours of the cords that are tied around the bodies of the initiates: in distinction from the white woollen cords (the *kusti*) worn by Zoroastrians in Iran and India, the Russian cords are tri-coloured – yellow, red and blue – symbolising, to Globa, the alleged three colours of the god Zurvan.

Apparently, by virtue of their initiations, these practitioners considered themselves to be Zoroastrians and thereby different from ordinary students of astrology, even when the latter continued to study Avestan astrology. In the mode of mimetic appropriation of established Zoroastrian patterns, Globa even initiated some particularly committed pupils to the status of priesthood (their name, *khorbād*, derives from the Zoroastrian priestly titles *herbed* or *ervad*), entitling these priests to conduct some rituals and to initiate candidates. Initially, there were around 10 such priests of both sexes, also including a married couple (Olga and Mikhail Chistyakov). Mikhail Chistyakov (b. 1962) served as Globa's deputy

in St Petersburg and as a junior leader of the St Petersburg community. It seems that the assembly of initiates considered itself as a separate religious group and the initiations were perceived as significant biographical events (Tessmann 2005, 118).

In St Petersburg, this sense of distinctiveness and the desire to count as a religious entity were probably key motives behind the step of formal registration as a religious association with the Justice Department of St Petersburg (Управление юстиции Санкт-Петербурга) on 7 April 1994. According to its statutes (quoted from the 1999 revised version), the Zoroastrian Community of St Petersburg (Зороастрийская Община Санкт-Петербурга) pursued two main aims:

(2.1.1) the joint profession of faith/worship [вероисповедание] of the Zoroastrian religion; (2.1.2) the joint conducting of religious services, celebrations and other religious rituals (none of the conducted rituals involve sacrifices of living beings). The proliferation and preaching of the Zoroastrian religion occurs on a voluntary basis and in accordance with the Legislation of the Russian Federation. (Statute 1999, 2)

This newly available legal option created the framework for literally ‘making’ Zoroastrianism into a ‘religion’ in Russia.⁵ The two main features of a ‘religion’ as defined by the statutes are a creed and rituals (with the effect of banning animal sacrifice from the realm of legitimate religious practice, probably because the group was of the opinion, as proposed by several influential scholars, that Zarathustra had abolished that practice). This concept of religion also emphasises its voluntary character and its conformity to state law.⁶

Evidently, this new religious organisation would not be able to meet the requirements imposed by the 1997 law *On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations* discussed earlier, in terms of the condition to have been in existence for at least 15 years. Yet, the decision of the Constitutional court in 1999 that religious organisations registered before 1997 have the right to maintain their juridical status (Shterin 2000, 204–05) smoothed the path for the valid continued existence of Zoroastrianism as an incorporated religion. In fact, on 10 July 2000, the Justice Department of St Petersburg re-registered it as the ‘Local Religious Organisation Zoroastrian Community of St Petersburg’ (местная религиозная организация ‘Зороастрийская Община Санкт-Петербурга’). The addition of the qualifier ‘religious’ to the name of the organisation is significant. Globa was appointed as the supreme authority, the ‘dean’ of the organisation (no Zoroastrian term was chosen for this office), but since he did not live in St Petersburg and acted at a distance, eventually a ‘junior dean’ was authorised to fill the vacuum created by Globa’s prolonged absences.

The St Petersburg Zoroastrian community continues to have the juridical status of a religious body.⁷ The community celebrates Zoroastrian festivals and a weekly liturgy. A great deal of effort went into periodicals such as the voluminous and lavishly illustrated magazine *Mitra*, which commenced publication in 1997 (and a small community newsletter *Tiri* published for a short time for community use).

Moreover, some members were actively engaged in translating Zoroastrian texts from English (and to a lesser degree Avestan) into Russian. Like many Russian New Agers, the St Petersburg Zoroastrians show an avid interest in Arkaim, an archaeological site in the Southern Urals, a kind of Russian Stonehenge and a destination for 'spiritual' tourism. Arkaim became also the target of the already mentioned festival-tour 'On the Path of Zarathushtra', because of the belief that the 'Aryan prophet' Zarathushtra lived in this area.

The Internet, alternative visions and international Zoroastrians

The founding of the St Petersburg Zoroastrian community happened in a period before the spread of the Internet. In the late 1990s, one of the new Russian Zoroastrians began to realise his idea of a website to serve the needs of the Zoroastrian community. The Internet also spread news about the Russian Zoroastrians amongst international Zoroastrians, and soon contacts were established between members of the St Petersburg community and Zoroastrians in the USA, Sweden and India. Zoroastrians from abroad sponsored the avesta.org.ru website (partly inspired by the American www.avesta.org) which was in existence until 2003. In 2000, a student of Iranian descent affiliated to an ASHA group in Minsk in Belarus attended a conference on ancient Iran in Gothenburg in Sweden where he met the recently initiated Zoroastrian priest of Iranian descent Kamran Jamshidi, who initiated him. When Jamshidi visited Minsk in 2001, he initiated further Avestan astrologers. In this manner, Russia became a mission field for a contemporary iteration of (neo-) Zoroastrianism (Stausberg 2007), and Globa's religious authority was supplemented, if not challenged, by a Zoroastrian priest from abroad. This has resulted in some tensions.

Gradually, this tension led to a differentiation amongst Russian Zoroastrians, when the Russian Assembly (Русский Анджоман, 'Russian Anjoman')⁸ was founded in Moscow in 2005. This new community, which is not formally registered as a religious organisation, engaged with the Russian Internet, RuNet, to a much greater extent.⁹ In fact, the Russian Anjoman has few collective activities outside virtual space. In 2007, activists of the Russian Anjoman launched the website blagoverie.org; this name, meaning something like 'The Good Faith', seems to be inspired by earlier Zoroastrian self-designations as 'the good religion'. On the main page of this portal, the aims of the Russian Anjoman are described as follows:

One of the major goals of Russian Anjoman is to get the Mazda Yasna recognized by the society and the government as a traditional religion along with Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism. To reach this goal, the Russian Anjoman is realizing projects to inform people about Good Faith, to scientifically research the Good Faith, and to organize cultural exchange between Anjoman members and Zoroastrians abroad. (<http://blagoverie.org/eng/anjoman/index.phtml>)

According to the Russian Anjoman, Zoroastrianism, here referred to by using names taken from old Zoroastrian scriptures, should be publically recognised as a

major 'traditional religion' like Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. For the Russian Anjoman, this desired status has three implications: such religion acquires an international character, and hence the support of, and exchange with, international Zoroastrians; second, 'major' religions are worthy of scientific (scholarly) study and gaining such attention bolsters legitimacy and third, traditional religions are scriptural religions and the Anjoman makes efforts, as explained on its website, to publish translations of Zoroastrian texts.

Since its foundation, the Russian Anjoman has exerted a great influence on post-Soviet Zoroastrian discourse on the Internet and in special Zoroastrian forums such as *avesta_ru* on the social media platform LiveJournal. By referring to the authority of the Iranian Mobed Council (the council of Zoroastrian priests) in Teheran, and translating old and contemporary Iranian Zoroastrian literature into Russian, the Russian Anjoman sharply opposed itself to the ASHAs and esoteric discourses. Moreover, in tune with modernist interpretations of Zoroastrianism in Iran and other countries, the Russian Anjoman praises the superiority of Zoroastrianism over the so-called Abrahamic religions because of its focus on ethics and the individual, as allegedly proclaimed by Zarathushtra in his *Gāthās*.

While the Russian Anjoman drew on Iranian Zoroastrian priests, the St Petersburg Zoroastrian community sought to establish connections with Indian (Parsi) Zoroastrians. In addition to his mimetic initiation into the Zoroastrian priesthood, one of the St Petersburg priests attempted to undergo a formal priestly initiation in India. In February 2010, upon invitation of Dame Dr Meher Master-Moos, an active Parsi esotericist, the St Petersburg junior leader Mikhail Chistyakov travelled to India, where Master-Moos assisted him to undergo a *navar* ceremony (the first grade or stage of the Zoroastrian priesthood), performed by two Parsi Zoroastrian priests (*ervads*) on the private premises of the Zoroastrian College, an institution run by Master-Moos and located in a coastal village approximately 150 kilometres north of Mumbai. However, when news of the ceremony leaked, encouraged by the Parsi community leadership in Mumbai who considered the initiation to be irregular, Chistyakov was assaulted by a mob and forced to return to Russia without completing the *navar* initiation.

Nativisation processes

While the Moscow Russian Anjoman draws on the authority of Iranian Zoroastrian priests such as mobed Ardashir Khorshidyan and modernist Zoroastrian discourses on the web, the St Petersburg Zoroastrian community is inspired by Globa's charisma and his alleged Iranian genealogy. At the same time, both groups frame their mimetic appropriation of Zoroastrianism in terms of claiming it to be part of Russian cultural heritage and history (which, notably, fits the requirement of the 1997 law). Recalling the significance of Arkaim as a site where Russian and Zoroastrian history presumably met, the recurrent strategy of 'nativisation' is evident in research on Zoroastrian patterns in Slavic folklore

featured in the magazine *Mitra* and in *blagoverie.org*'s project to uncover Zoroastrian heritage in many smaller cultures of former Soviet territories. The emphasis on linguistic and folkloristic similarities between Zoroastrianism and the Russian cultural heritage is an argumentative strategy shared by both groups.

Further parallels include their claims of total compatibility between science and Zoroastrianism and, somewhat paradoxically, their scepticism towards scholarly translations of Zoroastrian texts into Russian, which, in their view, should be translated anew by the believers themselves. Both groups implicitly engage in the discursive and imaginative reunification of the post-Soviet territories by suggesting that this cultural space, which is divided by political borders, was and is in fact culturally homogenous. In general, Russian Zoroastrians share with other urban post-Soviet new religious movements the key concerns of post-Soviet Russian identity and Russia's cultural heritage (Borenstein 1999, 451f).

Neopaganism and New Age

While both the St Petersburg Zoroastrian community and the Russian Anjoman function as separate religious groups – the former legally incorporated, the latter not – Zoroastrianism also operates as a significant other in two religious configurations that share some similar historical background and ideological parameters (Tessmann 2012).

First, there is (neo)Paganism, which like Globa's astrology originated in the late Soviet underground but has a stronger anti-Christian programme. Interestingly, one of the prominent figures of Russian patriotic *samizdat* and (neo)Pagan ideology since the 1970s, Anatolii Ivanov (Skuratov) (b. 1935), presented his religious philosophical views as 'Zoroastrian', 'Avestan' or 'Indo-Iranian', apparently mainly inspired by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) rather than by the religion of Zarathustra in its modern context (Verkhovsky, Mikhailovskaya and Pribylovsky 1999, 39; Pribylovsky 2002). In 1981, Ivanov also created an anti-Christian text titled *Zarathustra Did Not Speak Thus (The Basics of the Aryan Worldview)* [Заратустра говорил не так (Основы арийского мировоззрения)] where he suggested that Zoroastrianism should become a new paradigm for humankind. Paraphrasing a passage from one of the Avestan hymns (*Yasht* 19:89), Ivanov predicted that a 'Saoshyant' (Спаситель), a millenarian saviour, would start a new epoch (Ivanov [Skuratov] [1981] 2003). Perhaps this work (and possibly the impact of Globa) can explain why Zoroastrianism seems to be a permanent discussion topic within the Russian (neo)Pagan milieu.

Turning to the New Age, consider the case of the Cosmic Energy Movement 'Kosmoenergetika' (Космoэнергетика) that appeared during the late 1990s with the aim to heal the modern human being through Yoga and other Eastern (Jain, Buddhist and Zoroastrian) spiritual 'recovery' techniques. Some 'adepts of Kosmoenergetika' (космoэнергеты) arranged Zoroastrian mystical experience

sessions held by the prominent Indian Zoroastrian priest, ervad Dr Ramiyar Karanjia. Since 2004, Karanjia has been taking part in prayer sessions organised by an activist from Moscow, Evgeny Lugov, which are described as ‘initiations in the energetic power of the Zoroastrian faith’ and ‘purification of mental channels by reciting Zoroastrian prayers’. These courses, called conferences, can be attended annually in Moscow, Rostov-on-Don and Krasnoyarsk, and, since 2007, also in Arkaim. Unlike his colleague from Sweden/Iran, ervad Karanjia does not initiate people into Zoroastrianism, but rather shares Zoroastrian prayers with Russian New Agers.

The Russian Zoroastrian organisations also interact with other actors on the scene. The St Petersburg Zoroastrian community, for example, has collaborated with the Natureman group (Дитя природы, ‘Child of Nature’) founded in 2006. The Natureman community organises annual festivals around St Petersburg with diverse healing seminars and workshops in Eastern martial arts. In 2010 and 2011, a *khorbād* and leader of the St Petersburg Zoroastrian community, Konstantin Starostin was one of the instructors at the Natureman festival; he lectured on Avestan astrology, Zoroastrian doctrine, and astrological anthropology according to Globa’s teachings (Natureman 2010). For its part, *Mitra* published a text written by a Natureman activist (Arkhipov 2009).

Zoroastrianism beyond ‘religion’: academia, media, fiction

From a Religious Studies perspective, the discipline’s alignment to the category ‘religion’ intuitively limits inquiry to religious discourses, groups and phenomena. From a discourse analytical perspective, however, the focus can be extended considerably to attend to all forms of shaping knowledge about a given public subject. For Zoroastrianism in Russia, in addition to religious discourses, this includes the analysis of discourses in the media (journalism), the arts (fiction) and in the academy (Tessmann 2012).

The academic discourse on (and appropriation of) Zoroastrianism, for example, operates with its own conditions of establishing ‘truth’ about the subject matter, and is often not even concerned with Zoroastrianism as a religion but as a linguistic or historical entity. Academic publications about Zoroastrianism as a religion, on the other hand, even if written in a historical manner, have inspired their readers (like Pavel Globa) to actively engage with Zoroastrianism even if they apparently have misunderstood their original function, and as a result remained unsatisfied with the quality of the scholarly translations of the Zoroastrian texts. With the emergence of self-professed Russian Zoroastrianism, however, a dispute arose when a well-known scholar of Iranian Studies from St Petersburg, Prof. Ivan Steblin-Kamensky, used the afterword to an academic publication to sharply criticise recent self-identificatory appropriations of Zoroastrianism for their lack of legitimacy in Zoroastrian history and their restricted potential for future growth in an Orthodox Russia (Tessmann 2012, 126–30). However, there is also the voice of a younger Russian scholar of

religions from Lomonosov Moscow State University, Dr Igor Krupnik, who emphasises the polyphony of Zoroastrian identities and claims that Russian Zoroastrianism is just a case of Neo-Zoroastrianism; he has also been actively involved in online communication hosted by the Russian Anjoman (Tessmann 2012, 133–36).

Archaeological research is another area where scholars and the popular media creatively engage with Zoroastrianism. During the past two decades, the information about Zoroastrianism found in Russian reports on archaeological findings, mostly in Central Asia, reveals rather romantic ideas about the pre-Christian (and also pre-Islamic) past of the former territories of the Soviet Union and small ethnicities inside the Russian Federation. In articles on the archaeological settlements around Arkaim and the Bactria–Margiana Archaeological Complex, archaeologists such as Gennady Zdanovich and Viktor Sarianidi, as well as journalists, uncritically endorse the idea that the prophet Zarathushtra was born in Russia or in Central Asia. While paying some attention to scholarly production, most journalists have only very vague and inaccurate conceptions of Zoroastrianism. In general, media references to Zoroastrianism are fragmentary and oversimplified. Interestingly, Russian Zoroastrianism is absent from the widespread Russian anti-cult discourse and the Russian media by and large represent Russian Zoroastrians as ‘authentic’ Zoroastrians.

In Russian fiction of the 1990s and 2000s, one finds a surge of interest in Zoroastrianism (Tessmann 2012, 163–204). Most often, the reference to Zoroastrianism occurs in the context of theological constructs such as the dualism between good and evil or the practice of fire-worshipping that are borrowed from academic publications, encyclopaedic articles and mass media reports. By absorbing scholarly discourses of the ancient world and giving them a psychological dimension, fiction creates Zoroastrianism and Zoroastrian characters as imaginary or even non-existent; Zoroastrianism and Zoroastrian characters appear as subjects from the past and the future, communicated in registers of satire or fantasy. In postmodernist prose, Zoroastrianism is viewed sceptically (like every other religion); Aleksandr Zorich’s space opera *The Tomorrow War* (Завтра война), for example, presents Zoroastrianism as a narrow-minded ideology of the empire Concordia that is antagonistic to the human race on Earth (Zorich 2009); or in John Cole’s *The Atlantes: The Warrior* (Атланты. Воин) it appears as a skilful manipulation of ancient people by highly developed aliens (Cole 1995).

One of the central points of discussion about Zarathus(h)tra and Zoroastrianism in Russian literature during the twentieth century remains the strong reception of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. There are also Nietzschean epigones who use Nietzschean characters to interpret contemporary Russian society. Radical Nietzscheans do not regard Zoroastrianism as a religion, but as a metaphorical term that encompasses anarchist ideas known since the 1970s. Recently, this view was re-articulated by the Moscow poet Vsevolod Emelin in a 12-stanza poem entitled *The Moscow Zoroastrianism* (Emelin 2008),

but there are also some new tendencies to be observed. Some works of Slavic fantasy represent Zoroastrianism as the ‘teaching of the mages’ (the Indo-Aryan ancestors of the Slavonic peoples), and hence are regarded as genuine contributions to modern (neo)Pagan and Vedic doctrines (Alekseev 2010). Last but not least, Zoroastrian themes sometimes appear as metaphors (for instance as *dakhma* or mirror) in other genres, such as in Russian women’s prose (e.g. Elistratova 2005; Meklina 2009; see Sutcliffe 2009 on Russian women’s prose).

Concluding discussion: Russian Zoroastrianism – appropriation or invention?

This paper has proposed the notion of ‘appropriation of (a) religion’ which is often used to refer to the process whereby individuals are socialised into a religion. Some colleagues have already used it to describe processes similar to the ones analysed in this article, but mostly in indigenous or native religions; for example, Mikael Rothstein’s review of the appropriation of Hawaiian traditional religion by proponents of the New Age, which he interprets as an instance of cultural imperialism ‘or at least some kind of cultural dominance’ (Rothstein 2007, 327). While Rothstein presents a rather straightforward evaluation, for example when he states that ‘non-Hawaiians take on a pseudo-Hawaiian identity’ (Rothstein 2007, 333), Bron Taylor’s discussion of the appropriation of Native American religious practices by non-Indians brings to light ‘a morally muddy landscape’ leaving him ‘with significant ambivalence’ (Taylor 1997, 206). While he acknowledges that ‘the appropriation of native American spirituality can contribute to cultural decline’, there is also evidence that Native Americans are not passive targets in this process but ‘exert agency and demand reciprocity’. Moreover, some degree of cross-cultural borrowing ‘and blending is an inevitable aspect of religious life’. Last but not least, Taylor tentatively suggests that ‘some of such borrowing promotes respect for concrete political solidarity with Native Americans’ (Taylor 1997, 206). Taylor observes that ‘[t]he activists engaged in such borrowing do not presume that they are actually practicing *Native American* religion’ (Taylor 1997, 198). In our case study, however, this is precisely what has happened: some Russians have started to claim that they are ‘Zoroastrians’ and that they are practicing ‘Zoroastrianism’.

The ethical aspects of the appropriation of indigenous cultures and their religions have more recently been discussed by the Canadian philosophers James Young and Conrad Brunk who claim that the appropriation of these cultural and material resources has been so massive that one can speak of destruction or erosion of their cultural identities (Brunk and Young 2009). Outsiders who appropriate elements of other cultures such as religious symbols to some extent always distort and misrepresent these symbols by inserting them in other contexts of meaning and putting them to different use. Appropriation of religious symbols or other instances of culture can be perceived as theft and an offense. At the same time, the appropriators can invoke the right of freedom of belief and free cultural

expression. In their discussion of the resulting ethical dilemma, Brunk and Young argue that ‘liberty of conscience’ leaves people free to appropriate parts of other cultures ‘as long as they do not claim to be engaged in the authentic practice of the Indigenous religion, and as long as they have respected the rightful claims of ownership of expressions and practices’ (Brunk and Young 2009, 112). Although these two conditions have not been met in our Russian/Zoroastrianism case, no conflict about the issue of religious appropriation arose, at least in the first stage. One main reason for this seems to be the spatial and linguistic barriers between the appropriators and the appropriated. Initially, the appropriated did not even perceive that appropriation was taking place, and given that the process of appropriation occurred in a different country and given the initial absence of any direct communication between the appropriators and the appropriated, the latter had no reason to complain about being dominated and exploited or at all affected by the process of appropriation. At a later stage, however, a conflict did arise when the spatial gap was crossed, and a Russian Zoroastrian priest, Mikhail Chistyakov, was about to be formally legitimised as a Zoroastrian priest in India.

To what extent is our case study of ‘appropriation’ of a religion also an example of ‘invented religion’? We have argued that, in the first instance, Zoroastrianism was not invented but appropriated in Russia by Pavel Globa and his Avestan astrologers, and later by the Zoroastrian Community of St Petersburg and the Russian Anjoman. However, as an ‘indigenous’ Russian religion, it is clearly an ‘invention’ rather than a transfer or a transplant. Indeed, in its later stages, Zoroastrianism was ‘made’ into a legitimate Russian religion by moulding it into the new legal framework that from 1997 regulated the public status of religious groups. The newly devised and legally ‘made’ ‘Russian Zoroastrianism’ was then inserted into global Zoroastrian networks, which in turn led to its further internal diversification, including attention within academic and media discourses, and by fiction – each of which ‘invents’ religions of their own making.

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Notes

1. The text of the law can be found here: <http://graph.document.kremlin.ru/page.aspx?1153047>.
2. Since the beginning of Globa’s public teaching, there have been at least three main parallel developments in Russian astrology: Mikhail Levin (b. 1949) from the Moscow Academy of Astrology (founded in 1990: <http://astroacademia.narod.ru>), Sergey Shestopalov (b. 1950) from the St Petersburg Astrological Academy (founded in 1989: <http://www.astroacademy.spb.ru>) and Boris Boiko together with Karine Dilanyan from the League of Independent Astrologers and the Union of Professional Astrologers (founded in 1992 and 1997, respectively: <http://www.astrol.ru>).

3. For instance, despite his very critical description of Globa's activities, Albert Timashev (b. 1971) acknowledges his major role within the post-*perestroika* astrological community: see <http://faqs.org.ru/astro/globa.htm>.
4. See Stausberg 2011 for the general importance of tourism to religion and vice versa.
5. Our use of the term 'religion-making' is inspired by Mandair and Dressler (2011, 21) but none of their three forms (from above, from below, from outside) quite fits the situation described here.
6. In 1996, the articles of association were changed to solve problems stemming from the leadership structure, in particular the exalted position assigned to Pavel Globa in the original by-laws.
7. Shortly before this paper went to print, we learned that a local religious organization Zoroastrian Community (местная религиозная организация 'Зороастрийская Община'), a group of Globa's students in Moscow, was officially recognized on 16 May 2013; see the Russian social network VKontakte: <http://vk.com/mazdayasna>. We were informed that a lawyer belonging to the St Petersburg Zoroastrian community assisted them through the registration process. Some members were earlier active in a now defunct group called 'The White Mountain'. The 10–15 members of the Zoroastrian Community mainly meet privately, either in flats or out in the open, to celebrate the most important religious festivals (information provided in July 2013 by one member to Anna Tessmann).
8. 'Anjoman' is a Persian word often used for Zoroastrian community organisations in Iran and among Iranian Zoroastrians worldwide.
9. In 2001, the St Petersburg Zoroastrians launched their first website t-i-d.boom.ru. It provided information on the community, its vision of Zoroastrianism and the Zoroastrian lineage of Pavel Globa. Additionally, it offered a short biographical sketch on the junior leader of the community, Mikhail Chistyakov, and information about the magazine *Mitra*. Eight years later, in March 2009, the St Petersburg community started a new website zoroastrian.ru which, presumably influenced by the Russian Anjoman blagoverie.org, became the most comprehensive collection of diverse textual and visual materials on Zoroastrianism available in the post-Soviet space. The content and design of the two central websites of the Russian Zoroastrians – zoroastrian.ru and blagoverie.ru – suggest they were initially created to spread information. For example, zoroastrian.ru presupposes a rather broad idea of Zoroastrianism by linking it with ethnic and diasporic developments as well as with the Russian New Age scene, whereas blagoverie.org reflects a reformist view of Zoroastrianism that seeks to establish Zoroastrianism as a coherent doctrinal system, drawing on academic scholarship. For the former, in contrast, business and consumption are necessary attributes of their website: interest in Zoroastrianism is equivalent to the consumption of Zoroastrian literature, periodicals, symbols of affiliation and souvenirs. The Internet presence of both Zoroastrian groups contributes to their legitimization alongside other new religious movements in Russia.

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