

Vissarion and Anastasia Movements in Lithuania

Abstract

The report focuses on the twin phenomena of the Vissarion (other denominations include the Last Testament Church, the United Faith Community and the sect of Vissarion) and the Anastasia movements. Both New religious movements (NRMs) are examined in view of offering an alternative to the mainstream forms of religion in SAL (2006-2008) research. Emphasis is placed on the importance of social and ideological contexts in the construction of alternative religious worldviews and identities as well as on the importance of group internal and external dynamics in two NRMs. Special attention is given to the role of such dynamics in the development of the post-Soviet cultural heritage and in the communication of the Western cultural influence on the religiosity of Eastern Europe.

Keywords: alternative socio-religious movements, spirituality, alternative worldviews, identities and construction of social models, Western culture, post-Soviet cultural heritage

Introduction

Many NRMs can be examined in view of offering an alternative to the mainstream forms of religion. One part of the SAL research focused on the relative importance of social and ideological contexts in the construction of the alternative religious identities of members of two NRMs which emerged in Russia in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and have since spread to Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. These are the Vissarion New religious movement and the “spiritual” Anastasia movement, which can be seen as a New Age ideology. This study also explores the meaning of religious identity and how it influences – and is influenced by – local and global cultures ultimately producing a religious subculture. Particular attention is given to the role of these dynamics in the development of the post-Soviet cultural heritage and in the communication of the Western cultural influence on the religiosity of Eastern Europe. Emphasis was placed on their respective living environments as well as on their alternative worldviews, philosophical and social systems in comparison and contrast to those of Western culture.¹ Both movements,

1 “Western culture” here primarily refers to the modern manifestation of consumerist global capitalism as well as those cultural factors, influences and trends preceding it.

in their self-presentation and self-understanding, relied upon the perceived failure of the mainstream culture in Lithuania and Russia and upon the turn to the self as understood by P. Berger, B. Berger & Kellner (1974) and Tipton (1982), as critiques of the modern technocratic society, according to Vissarion and Anastasia members, who criticise civilisation and wish to establish alternative institutions. The findings of the research are based on the data obtained from fieldwork carried out over a three-year period (2006-2008), including participant observation and interviews with respondents in Lithuania (groups in the Vissarion and Anastasia movements).

Methods

In the research, an interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological approach was applied in order to collect data about contemporary spiritualities in Eastern European communities, particularly the Vissarion religious movement and the Anastasia spiritual movement. The collection of data using fieldwork techniques, the analysis of the mass media, the transcription of data as well as the data analysis and systematisation were performed during Fieldwork 1. The preparation and verification of the questionnaire for Fieldwork 2 were completed during the workshop on verification of the results from Fieldwork 1. The collection of data was carried out in view of the approved questionnaire in the communities selected for Fieldwork 1, while other communities were investigated during Fieldwork 2 (August-December 2007). The questionnaire provided here was applied to 20 members of the Vissarion movement and 15 members of the Anastasia movement in the cities of Kaunas, Vilnius, Kaišiadorys and their districts (August-December 2007); the fieldwork extension was in January-December 2008. The analysis of the data, obtained with the help of the questionnaires, was completed later using an electronic archive system. The data from the case study of the groups of the Vissarion and Anastasia movements were marked for systems theory analysis.

Results

The empirical fieldwork was carried out in Lithuania. The objectives of the fieldwork were to study the Vissarion and Anastasia movements in Lithuania and to reveal the main trends in values and religious beliefs throughout Lithuania (and the region of Eastern Europe). To reach these objectives, the ways in which these movements interacted with their socio-cultural environments were examined in five areas: 1) the formation and maintenance of the movements, 2) the internal dynamics that turns them into social entities, 3) their social and worldview structures, 4) the type

of leadership that provides “divine legitimation” for the groups’ beliefs and practices and 5) the levels and types of commitment demanded of their devotees.

The largest community of Vissarion in Siberia, known as the United Family, has established what they call “Heaven on Earth” where idealised images and new roles for members, their rituals and daily lives abound. The aim of establishing such a community, as it follows from the research findings, involves a gradual seclusion from what Vissarion movement members call the “Old World” (the civilised society) by means of creative arts and crafts as well as intensive physical and spiritual work – all of which have the approval of their Vissarion leadership. Similarly the Anastasian understanding and definition of space, both secular and religious, result in the creation of “Love Spaces”, namely family homesteads about one hectare in size (set up in various places around the cities of Lithuania) which are conceived as linking “person, nature and cosmos”. The “Love Space” provides a context for an alternative system of individual social structures. This is considered by Anastasians to be the ideal model for both society and the cosmos, which are understood to mirror one another in a harmonious, reflective relationship. These conceptions depend on an “ecological” view of the individual and collective spirituality by interacting in the process of creating the “Love Space”, which is fundamental to the self-understanding of Anastasia members.

By choosing alternatives to the mainstream way of thinking and living, members of the Vissarion and Anastasia movements also attach alternative meanings to their decisions and actions. This consequently results in the feeling of belonging and the construction of the member identities. The movements offer an alternative to traditional religious value systems, beliefs and worldviews. What they seek to do is either to look for or to construct alternative forms of spirituality having various eclectic sets of “spiritual” elements (usually of an exotic, magical and esoteric character) of alternative syncretic type teachings and practices. Such elements include a belief in the power of thought and its impact on people, the basing of energy for all existing beings, reincarnation, free interpretation of faith (original, usually unclear conceptions of God) and the like. These features can be found in various philosophies of New Age spirituality, and this kind of behaviour is common for New Age spirituality seekers (Heelas, 2005; Sutcliffe, 2003).

Vissarion² and Anastasia³ are important symbolic figures who influence members of these movements. However, the cult of the leader Vissarion remains in opposition

2 Vissarion (before: Sergey Anatolyevitch Torop [Russian: Сергей Анатольевич Тороп]), the leader of the Church of the Last Testament, is considered by the members to be a teacher and the reincarnated Jesus Christ, one who brings new spiritual teaching to the world.

3 Anastasia is the main hero in the anthology of books by Vladimir Megre, a forest-based hermit in Siberia, whose teachings are related with ideas of naturalism, ecology and spirituality.

to the freely and individually perceived philosophy of Anastasia. An apocalyptic mood is evident in the Vissarion movement, whereas a more optimistic attitude towards the future is characteristic of the Anastasia movement in Lithuania. Anastasian groups are relatively open to the outside social influence and evidence a significant growth, while the more conservative and insular Vissarion groups tend to fade away and die. Currently (2009) in Lithuania, the Vissarion movement has 30 adult members (50 with children). Over the period of the movement's existence in Lithuania, the number of members has decreased and is still slightly decreasing. Quite amorphous and with their members belonging to a number of different organisations, Anastasian groups (including official clubs in the biggest cities, nine family homesteads and independent individuals) could be seen as counting about 1,000.⁴ The philosophy of Anastasia is still attracting new people. This situation appears to contradict the standard expectation that conservative and closed congregations tend to grow, whilst liberal ones tend towards atrophy (Bibby, 1987).⁵

All fieldwork results were presented in reports and oral presentations in SAL and other workshops and conferences in Lithuania and abroad.

Discussion and conclusions (policy recommendations included)

The rise of NRMs is a complex phenomenon which involves many different facets of Eastern European social, cultural and religious life. Some NRMs do experience tensions in their relations with mainstream society. For example, a negative attitude towards the research groups of the Vissarion and Anastasia movements (also new religiosity phenomena in general) is obvious in the mass media approach. However, any claims about NRMs being destructive to the society have not been proven. Some movements stress non-traditional values; others do not. Modern societies need to learn how to respond best to such movements and how to interpret their benefits and dangers. The movements which were studied reveal challenges to the changing contemporary Eastern European society. These movements are not satisfied with the contemporary civilisation and social realities. They create alternative and ideal societal projects and models having a utopian character. Both groups are formed in the same socio-cultural environment of a city. Although members of the Vissarion and Anastasia movements wish more or less to separate themselves from the contemporary materialistic society which is considered to be based on Western (also post-communist) values, there are many people living in cities. Thus members of the movements which were studied still

4 The claim is based on the data from the fieldwork in Lithuania (2006-2008).

5 One of research aims was to explain the possible reasons for this and to determine whether they were largely constructed ideologically (in the frame of the philosophy of movements) or sociologically (influenced by political, economical and cultural changes in the broader society).

remain as a part of society. Members of the Vissarion and Anastasia movements are examples of the search for individual subcultural values, worldviews and identities. The NRMs express, rather than cause, the changes that society has been going through in the first half of the 21st century. We have to broaden the diversity of viewpoints and perspectives of NRMs and to encourage each other to make broader and more balanced reflections (mostly more tolerant) on NRMs in Eastern Europe.

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Visariono ir Anastasijos judėjimai Lietuvoje

Santrauka

Straipsnyje pristatomas Visariono (kiti pavadinimai: Paskutinio Testamento bažnyčia, Vieningo tikėjimo bendruomenė ir Visariono sekta) ir Anastasijos judėjimų tyrimas. Dalyvaujant SAL tyrimų projekte 2006–2008 m., abu naujieji religiniai judėjimai (NRJ) buvo nagrinėjami kaip alternatyva vyraujančioms religijos formoms. Lauko tyrimų metu taikytas stebėjimo dalyvaujant grupės veiklose metodas, apklausta 20 Visariono ir 15 Anastasijos bendruomenių dalyvių, naudojant SAL projekto klausimyną (žr. priedą, p. 276).

Autorė akcentuoja socialinio ir ideologinio kontekstų svarbą alternatyvių religinių pasaulėžiūrų ir tapatybių kūrimui, aptaria grupių vidinius pokyčius, kurie susiję ir su posovietinės visuomenės kaita. Pažymima Vakarų kultūros įtaka Rytų Europos gyventojų religingumui. Straipsnyje pateikiami tyrinėtų grupių pasaulėžiūrinių vertybinių sistemų bruožai, grupių narių integracijos į visuomenę lygmuo, kylančios problemos.

Rekomendacijose socialinėms institucijoms autorė pažymi įtampų, kurios kyla tarp grupių ir visuomenės, mažinimo būtinybę, masinių informacijos priemonių neigiamą poveikį, būtinumą pateikti teisingą informaciją apie grupių vertybes, jų gyvenimo būdą ir elgesį.

Raktažodžiai: alternatyvūs socialiniai religiniai judėjimai, dvasingumas, alternatyvios pasaulėžiūros, tapatybės ir socialinių modelių kūrimas, Vakarų kultūra, posovietinės kultūros paveldas.