As in Western Europe, over the past two decades many “new religious movements” have been developing in Russia. The alternative spirituality, interest in Eastern religions, esotericism, occultism, astrology, and research on aliens has been fashionable among Soviet urban elites since the 1970s; alternative therapies, which promote holistic and psychological medicine, have also grown. As in Germany, Scandinavia, England, Ireland, and France, groups inspired by Wicca, New Age, Druidism, Heathens, Tolkienism, and Satanism have appeared on the Russian religious scene. Among these the Rodnoverie, or ethnic faith, movements seek to restore the pre-Christian religion of the Slavs, and are among the most visible and numerous. They have benefited from the conjunction of spiritual quests, questions about Russian national identity after the Soviet experience, the rediscovery of traditions and folklore of the Russian peasantry, and paranormal scientists being in vogue. Like other non-conventional spiritual practices, this ethnic faith movement believes in a concealed wisdom that institutionalized religions would seek to erase. While propagating exoteric beliefs, the Rodnoverie movement attaches importance to certain esoteric practices, namely mythology, holistic body exercises, symbolism, rituals associated with seasons and deities, and harmony with nature—all elements of occult belief that allow one to glimpse into higher worlds and interact with mother-Earth and her gods, but also to find ones place among ancestors and therefore in the national community.

The Kaleidoscope of Rodnoverie: A Wide Range of Beliefs and Practices

Many movements in Russia now claim the “Mother Faith” (rodnoverie), a generic term comprising a large variety of groups, objectives, and practices, sometimes contradictory. Rodnoverie is an internal term used by supporters to self-define. They reject the external designation of “neo-pagan” because they do not consider themselves “new” and paganism often has a negative connota-
tion vis-à-vis Christianity. Rodnoverie seeks to be broader than a neo-pagan religious practice and more inclusive than just adherence to a pantheon of pre-Christian gods. Another commonly used internal term is Vedic Faith (vedizm, vedicheskaia vera), which refers to ancient Indo-Iranian Vedism texts (Avesta and the Rig-Veda), Ancestrism (rodianstvo), or natural faith (prirodnaia vera). Rodnoverie cannot necessarily be defined as a religion in the strict sense. Some of its followers prefer to speak of spirituality (dukhovnost’), wisdom (mudrost’), or a form of philosophy or worldview (mirovozzrenie).² According to Kaarina Aitamurto, it is fairly safe to say that there are at least 10,000 rodnovers in Russia, even if the calculation is difficult to demonstrate and boundaries between groups are often fluid.³

The Rodnoverie phenomenon was not born from the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991. Since the Russian interwar emigration, some searches for national identity have become radical and certain exiles came to deny the conventional place of Orthodoxy as the key element of “Russian soul”. In the émigré journal Zhar-Ptitsa, published in the 1950s in San Francisco, several authors were interested in a so-called manuscript dating from the first centuries before the Common Era. The Book of Veles (Vlesova kniga) describes the bravery of the ancient Slavs and their authentic faith.⁴ The probable forger of this manuscript, Iurii Mirolubov (1892–1970) was the first to use the term “Vedism” to designate this neo-paganism.⁵ As early as the 1960s, the Book of Veles was established as an authentic manuscript by Russian émigré nationalists as well as by some exiled Ukrainians, particularly in the circles close to another great propagandist of the book, Sergei Lesnoi (i.e. Sergei Paramonov, 1898–1968). Despite the absence of any first edition assessed by experts, these groups present the book not only as an indisputable historical source concerning Slavic antiquity, but also as a set of prayers and hymns to ancient gods that can be “put into practice.”

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⁴ This book was supposedly discovered during the Russian Civil War by White Army officer, F. A. Izenbek, but the original wooden boards on which the text was written would have been lost during the Second World War. However, one of Izenbek’s friends, Iuri Mirolubov, would have had the time to study and copy them.
It also seems that in the Soviet Union itself, the rebirth of Russian nationalism, supported by Stalin since the second half of the 1930s, may have made possible the consolidation of Vedic discourses. Stalin took a keen interest in the research carried out on Slavic antiquity and hoped he could demonstrate the ancient communism of the Russian people. Some researchers, among them the academician Boris Rybakov (1908–2001), former head of the Institute of Archaeology, then provided the first scientific arguments to support the neo-pagan doctrine. In the 1960s, the renewal of atheist activism organized by Nikita Khrushchev also presupposed the re-rendering of certain pre-Christian or pre-Islamic traditions. From this time through the 1980s, Russian intellectuals were disturbed by what they viewed as an eradication of traditional Russian culture and the loss of a distinctive Russian identity. According to Viktor Shnirel’man, the first manifesto of Russian neo-paganism was the letter “Critical remarks by a Russian man on the patriotic newspaper Veche” (Kriticheskie zametki russkogo cheloveka o patrioticheskom zhurnale Veche), published anonymously in 1973 by Valerii Emelianov (1929–1999), an expert on the Middle East who was then close to Khrushchev. In this text, Emelianov clearly expressed the idea that Christianity is simply an expression of Jewish domination and serves the interests of Zionism, much disparaged in the Soviet propaganda of the time.

The Pamiat’ nationalist movement, which emerged at the very beginning of the 1980s, constituted one of the meeting places of personalities attracted to this “Vedic component” of Russian identity. In 1983, Pamiat’ organized a session devoted to the Book of Veles headed by Valerii Skurlatov (b. 1938), who assumed the arguments put forward by the Russian émigré groups. Until 1985, the association was openly neo-pagan, but after that date became more traditionally Orthodox and close to monarchist circles. Both religious trends co-existed for some time within Pamiat’, but the neo-pagans eventually left the movement. Vedic sensibility was also expressed much more officially in certain Soviet academic circles. In 1988, Apollon Kuzmin (1928–2004), the leader of neo-Slavophile historiography, claimed in The Fall of Perun (Padenie Peruna) that the true Russian national faith was paganism, as Orthodoxy had led to subjugation by the Mongols. Discourses on the rehabilitation of paganism could also be found in the last books of Boris Rybakov—in particular The Paganism of the Ancient Slavs (Iazychestvo drevnikh slavian), published in 1981,

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7 Ibid., 231.
Since the 1990s the Rodnoverie movement has expanded and diversified. It has reached wide audiences in large part due to the publications of Aleksandr Asov (b. 1964), whose books on the philosophy of pre-Christian Slavs have sold millions of copies. The Rodnoverie movement is in principle largely decentralized, with hundreds of groups coexisting without submission to any central structure that would include the entire Russian territory. Many groups exist only in a city or region and have horizontal, rather than hierarchical, relations to other groups with similar affinities. The societal and political views espoused by adherents are extremely broad, ranging from extreme pacifism to militarism, from complete de-politicization or semi-anarchism to far right groups defining themselves as National-Socialists. Very few groups are registered as religious movements and most exist as cultural associations or without legal status. The most politicized Rodnoverie are the most popular because they demonstrate their beliefs in the media and on the internet, are known for their anti-Christian propaganda, and sometimes participate in violent acts, up to crime in the name of their racist or anti-Christian beliefs, even if it is always difficult in the case of murders to measure the actual weight of religious beliefs in the act.

The most well known of the politicized Rodnoverie movements are Viktor Bezverkhii’s (1930–2000) Union of the Veneds⁹ (the former Society of the Magi), based in Leningrad; the Church of Nav, founded by Il’ia Lazarenko and openly referring to German Ariosophy and the Ku Klux Klan; the small group K bogoderzhaviu, which tried to campaign during elections and lobby the Duma; Aleksandr Sevast’ianov’s (b. 1954) National Party of the Russian Great Power, which has also some connections with politicians close to the mayor of Moscow Iurii Luzhkov; and the Party of Aryan Socialism run by Vladimir Danilov. For all of these groups, religious arguments are only one element of national identity, among others.¹⁰ Their ideology is radical in its nationalism,

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⁹ “Vened” was the name given by Germans to an ancient Slavic people that lived in Central Europe, also called Wends. Subsequently, the term was applied to all Slavs.

racism, and anti-Semitism. Some members are violently anti-Soviet, but more defend socialist theories and others are even nostalgic for Stalinism, seeing it as a successful political expression of paganism. Many skinhead groups also defend Vedic ideas, which are often spread by heavy metal groups. Nevertheless, one cannot consider them religious followers in the sense that ideological references play an instrumental role in the youth counter culture, which defines itself above all through a protest-driven way of life, the rejection of adult life, and a sense of community.  

Other groups are more centered on religious revival, even if they also call for Russians to reclaim and defend their ethnic identity. Aleksandr Belov’s martial arts club (the Association of Slavonic-Goritsa Wrestling) had an impressive 40,000 members in its heyday in the mid-1990s, even though not all of them were followers of Slavic Vedism. Among the most numerous Rodnoverie groups, each having hundreds of members, are the very nationalistic Union of Slavic Communities of Native Faith led by Dobroslav; the Circle of Pagan Tradition, which unites several dozens of groups from various Russian towns; the Ancient Russian Ingliistic Church of Orthodox Old Believers-Ingliists (ARICOOBI), often considered one of the most sectarian and authoritarian Rodnoverie movements; Viatichi’s Koliada, one of the oldest traditionalist groups and a regular participant in the World Congress of Ethnic Religions; and the Circle of Veles led by a charismatic leader, Veleslav, who is said to refuse nationalist rhetoric and be open on principle to tolerance. They form communities for whom religious practice requires a ritual of de-Christianization, the adoption of a pagan name, and wearing traditional Russian clothes. These groups are among the main producers of Rodnoverie knowledge, posing works and articles on their websites that analyze their philosophy and links to original Indo-European religions, give explanations of the rituals of their organizations and the holidays of the Vedic calendar, and organize commemorative gatherings and seasonal festivals in the cities where they are based. Even though priority seems to be given to faith over national

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12 www.rodnovery.ru


14 http://www.velesovkrug.ru/
identity, the two are seen as being inextricably linked. An adherent of Rodnoverie must be a good Russian who respects national traditions, is conscious of his ethnic traditions and the history of his ancestors.

But there also exist groups for which political affiliation and identity matters little or not at all. They conceive of Rodnoverie as one movement among others in the mix of new religions: spiritualism, theosophy, anthroposophy, cosmisim, Satanism, neo-Eastern religions, New Age groups, and extraterrestrial beliefs. These groups recruit among young people, especially in student circles. They seek to reclaim the ancient rituals described in historical and ethnological sources on the Russian countryside. They are based on a general need for the public to rediscover the national past and culturally rehabilitate regional folklore. Thus public interest in the history of Slavic antiquity, folk oral traditions, regional cultural specificities, and the rediscovery of ancient peasant rites and superstitions related to the worship of Mother Earth (witchcraft, folk beliefs, and the practices of Old Believers), including “double faith” (dvoeverie, a mixture of Christian and pagan practices documented in ethnological sources) promote the union of folk revival and nationalist theories. Solstice rituals in particular attract thousands of people for whom the reference to an ancient and natural religion is devoid of political links. Some small groups seek to live in a financially independent manner by producing traditional handicrafts or rehabilitating ancient pharmacy, which they sell at markets or folk fairs. It should be mentioned that this Rodnoverie style is also a commercial product. All major groups have a shop where they sell “typically Slavic” jewelry and ornaments, musical instruments, posters and calendars illustrated with reproductions of pagan imagery, and designs inspired by science fiction and Tolkien, and regularly participate in markets and craft fairs.

Russian Rodnoverie has started to develop international contacts with other European movements with similar religious precepts. Their pan-Slavic sensibilities invite them to collaborate mainly with Ukrainian, Belorussian, and Serbian movements. The same forged manuscripts often inspire them, in particular of the Book of Veles, and they make similar references to Slavic identity. For instance, the All-Slavic Council of Native Believers gathers Rod-

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17 “Runnyi posokh,” http://runposoh.clan.su
Rodnoverie followers from the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Some have developed relations with German and Scandinavian groups. The Baltic countries are also known for their neo-pagan movements, which played an important role in the struggle for independence of these republics in 1990 and 1991. In Latvia, the Dievturiba association, founded in 1990, includes about one thousand people. It draws its inspiration from the association of the same name, which was founded in the 1920s with the objective of bringing back the ancient Latvian religion, but the Soviet authorities repressed the movement when they occupied the republic. In Lithuania, the Romuva movement emerged as a cultural association as early as 1967 at the occasion of the summer solstice. Headed by Jonas Trinkunas but having only a few hundred members, the movement advocated the rediscovery of national faith by the rehabilitation of popular songs, practices, and rituals. As in the case of Russian Rodnoverie, the Baltic movements are split between far right activists and partisans of a national rebirth that would be expressed in religious and cultural terms.

Rodnoverie Worldview and Faith

Rodnoverie is not lacking in tensions in its conception of faith. It is an “open source religion” and thus follows in part New Age movements according to which the world experiences different levels of reality. It also calls for adherence to tradition, composed of the legacy of Slavic ancestors for whom the strictest possible respect is owed. However, some groups admit that what they know about the authentic Slavic religion is very fragmented and therefore its reconstruction is personal. According to the majority of Rodnoverie followers, neither a unique dogma nor a supreme authority exists. They insist on the direct link, with no interference, between man and the divine. Rodnoverie is a faith without a prophet, a sacred text (even if some treat the Book of Veles as a text of prayers), any institutionalized place of worship (with the exception of some minority groups who support the construction of temples, worship is done in nature), clergy (priests exist, but they do not have the authority to

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21 An “open source religion” emphasizes individual participation and doctrinal evolution, and calls for the personal creation of religious belief systems.
intervene with god, as in Orthodoxy or Catholicism), without dogma and interdicts, or mandatory rites and prayers.\textsuperscript{22}

The search for meaning can only be an individual one and each human is entitled to establish his or her own pantheon of beliefs in diverse combinations. Individual interpretations and sensations dominate over any institutionalized ideas. This assertion often comes with a discourse on the democratic nature of the faith. Rodnoverie is presented as a religion devoid of any social exploitation, power relations, or financial and institutional reality.\textsuperscript{23} Human freedom is thus expressed through the equality of men in their access to the divine. Social justice is therefore an important element of reference. Christianity is denounced as a hierarchical, centralized power that defended the rich throughout its history, accepted the enslavement of man by man, and legitimized a slave mentality. Although certain Rodnoverie groups founded by charismatic leaders are prone to relatively authoritarian visions of power and cultivate the image of a head guru, the majority call for the rejection of power relations, and the autonomy and responsibility of the individual, actively campaigning against drinking, smoking, and drugs.\textsuperscript{24}

Followers do not perceive eclecticism and syncretism of religious inspiration as contradictory. It is therefore difficult to determine whether neo-pagan followers think of their faith in monotheist, polytheist, or pantheist terms. Some of them assert the existence of a unique superior principle (Rod or Svarog), while others advocate the existence of multiple gods with dissociated functions. Some insist on a dual conception, with Belbog representing the good principle and Chernobog embodying the evil; others prefer to believe in a trinity consisting of the Creator, the Destroyer, and the Harmonizer. The general precepts are based on the idea of a trinity with Iav (the visible world), Nav (the world of beyond), and Prav (the world of laws), which represent different levels of reality. Even the Russian pantheon mentioned by all Rodnoverie movements is not unified. Several gods from ancient Slavic mythology like Svarog (god of the sun), Veles (god of the earth), Perun (god of thunder), Dazhbog, and Khors are in mutual competition, with each movement giving preference to one or


\textsuperscript{23} Mariya Lesiv, “Glory to Dazhboh (Sun-god) or to All Native Gods?: Monotheism and Polytheism in Contemporary Ukrainian Paganism,” \textit{Pomegranate} 11 (2009), 2, 147–164.

\textsuperscript{24} See for example the strict rules Krivichi put forward on the use of alcohol and cigarettes, and respect for nature, http://www.krivichi.3dn.ru/index/0-2
the other. Others refer to ancient Germanic gods such as Thor and Odin, inspired by Western traditions, especially Scandinavian ones. The majority has several dozen gods; gods of fire, fertility, fisheries, the Earth, the moon, animals, and the dead complement the gods of the natural elements.

In addition, all movements invite their members to add their own ancestors to the pantheon, since the worship of one’s lineage (rod) is considered a basic principle. Everyone can create his own religious combinations. “Each of us can choose objects to worship,” announced the group Slavia; however, while respecting a minimal framework in which the idea of national tradition dominates. Each movement, for example, produces its own calendar and organizes festivities around the passage of seasons, the memory of the dead, and the natural elements. They help make popular ancient Russian peasant festivals (Ivan Kupala, Koliada, and Maslenitsa) and celebrations of the solstice, which succeeded in bringing together wide audiences more interested in the festive and folkloric, rather than religious, aspects of the event. Some Rodnoverie movements draw their inspiration in part from oriental religions, following the popular propensity toward Eastern spirituality within the Russian intelligentsia during the last decades of Soviet Union. They mention Buddha, Zarathustra, and Manu, as well as many Hindu divinities and the holy text of the Krishnas, the Bhagavad Gita. Within these trends, there has been widespread reading of Elena Blavatsky (1831–1891), Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), and Carlos Castaneda (1931–1998), the last two translated into Russian in the 1990s. The same applies to the work of George Gurdjieff (1873–1949), Petr Uspenskii (1878–1947), Nicholas Roerich (Nikolai Rerikh, 1874–1947), and theoreticians of Cosmism. The practice of energetic healing, Asian medicine, martial arts, and diverse versions of yoga are integral parts of this Oriental-inspired Rodnoverie. Some of them are focused on the ideas of bio energy, karma, reincarnation, telepathy, and stories about UFOs and the mysteries of the cosmos. The most politicized movements prefer to refer to the German and Austrian arisosophists of the early twentieth century, and Traditionalist thinkers like Julius Evola or René Guénon.

*Rodnoverie* presents itself as post-modern and attempting to rehabilitate the spiritual to the detriment of the material. Institutionalized religions grant too much importance to their ritual and theological aspects, while *Rodnoverie*

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25 See for example the importance the group *Rodstvo* accords to genealogy, http://rodstvo.ru/


would put morality, ethics, and spirituality at the center of its message. Eschatological patterns and problematic relations to modernity are recurrent in Rodnoverie. Its followers often think that mankind is on the road to ruin by denying religious values in favor of material well-being. The development of technology and knowledge of natural science has given men the illusory idea of control over nature. The modern world has thus embarked on a dead-end path that would lead the whole of mankind to its downfall, while the Soviet experience confirmed the impossibility of man dominating nature. This denunciation of industrial modernity represents a recurring element of Rodnoverie discourse in which what is at stake is not material comfort, but the meaning given to life. According to them, the origin of the current technological madness could be found in the great historical religions. As a result, they condemn Christianity and other Abrahamic religions as anthropocentric. By asserting that man was created in the likeness of God, and by suggesting that the latter could have been incarnated as a man (Christianity) or could have transmitted his message through a man (Islam), these religions distort the place of mankind within nature. Only nature could be considered representative of the divine on earth, with man occupying a more modest position in this hierarchy.

Presenting itself as a natural religion, Rodnoverie insists on the need to “return” to nature and defend ecological claims. The group Slavia thus regularly posts on its website virulent critiques of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, which will have a significant impact on deforestation and has been denounced by groups like Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund.29 Rodnoverie imagery often evokes the countryside as “typically Russian”— birch and fir forests, lakes, and wooden villages in the snow, relying on old references worked by nineteenth century Romantic painting and national folklore artists like Ivan Bilibin (1876–1942). Since the nineteenth century, the idea that the “Russian soul” is fundamentally marked by the landscape of the country has constituted a classic element in discourse on the “Russian idea.” This discourse belongs to the most persistent clichés, according to which Russian identity would not fit the Western schemes: the vastness of the territory, and the flat, dull, and dreary nature of the great Russian plain would invite one to withdraw to family life, religious meditation, and contemplation, but not to political or social commitment. Moreover, as early as the 1960s, environmentalist sensibilities have constituted one of the main sources of demands coming from Russian national circles, which were opposed to the Soviet willingness to submit nature to the

industrial needs of the regime. Some Rodnoverie groups take for themselves the ancient Russian traditions of the cult of Mother Earth by claiming that the Slavs, children of the forest, will be the first to rediscover harmony with nature.30

Occult Concepts and Practices in Rodnoverie

In this conceptual framework, occult theories and practices constitute an important part of Rodnoverie; however, it cannot be completely considered an occult movement. Some of its practices like readings and prayers are rather exoteric and public, fully disclosed to everyone. The initiatory character may be significant, but it differs between groups and the leadership’s viewpoint on this exoteric versus esoteric question. Some seek to combine the “natural Slavic faith” with a belief in alchemy, arcane science, and forms of white or black magic, while others insist on the exoteric, popular, and folk character of their faith. Furthermore, as Rodnoverie conceptions vary among individuals, the level of commitment of members plays a key role in links to the occult. Thus, the least invested members and the most open communities tend to spread exoteric knowledge, which is accessible to many people and insist on folklore (for example, organizing large celebrations for the solstice). But more closed groups, for which the commitment required by individuals is more stringent, advocate for esoteric practices such as complex initiation rituals, including references to a kind of Kabbalah, prayers and belief in magic. Rodnoverie being more a worldview than a practice, the occult appears primarily at the level of discourse in three main areas: the feeling of having hidden or secret knowledge, accessible only to a limited group of insiders, the belief in superior knowledge that gives access to the supernatural world, and the idea of having, through this connection with a higher world, a power over human beings, world events, and even mind control.

All Rodnoverie groups are based on the idea that religion is a hidden knowledge that only those who are “awake” to the true faith can understand. This vision of self is common in all new religious movements, which paint in heroic terms their small size compared to major institutionalized churches. This is reinforced by the idea that for two millennia, Christianity has deliberately destroyed the pagan memory, denied its presence in the popular consciousness, and done everything possible to prevent a new awareness of the

original faith of the Slavs.\textsuperscript{31} This secret understanding is accessible through myths, tales, and legends, which are thought of as relics transformed over centuries into ancient knowledge that one must now decipher and reinterpret, since the original meaning is no longer apparent.\textsuperscript{32} As stated by Aleksandr Belov: “Myths are the subconscious of humanity. There was a time when they were reality. Time has transformed them into tales, the original links to the heroes having been lost.”\textsuperscript{33} Among the most common and successful of Rodnoverie myths, the myth of Belovod’e, or the kingdom of white water, is an update of an eighteenth century belief from the culture of Old Believers. A Russian version of Atlantis, Belovod’e expresses the belief in an ancient esoteric world that disappeared from the face of the Earth, but not from the memory of mankind.\textsuperscript{34} However, unlike some readings of Atlantis, Belovod’e did not disappear by its own fault (the claim of human civilization to control nature), but due to eschatological natural events.

Through its militant atheism, as well as the conspiracy theories to which it has indirectly given birth, the Soviet period accentuated this sense of secret knowledge waiting to be discovered. Although some Rodnoverie groups insist on their tolerance for all beliefs as a basic principle of the Native faith, most publications have a tendency to explain the world in very Manichean terms, with minority forces of good struggling against the majority forces of evil. They apply methods of alternative history, which refers to a broad editorial genre that encompasses many fields, including the paranormal, especially the mysteries of ancient civilizations and the study of parallel worlds, the analysis of history “that did not happen”, and conspiracy theories against Russia. While alternate history in Western Europe is often devoid of nationalist pretexts, this is not the case in Russia. Allusions to mysterious or parallel worlds that could have existed on Russian territory are often influenced by Aryan assumptions or claims on the superiority of Russian civilization, which supposedly inspired all great ancient cultures. The majority of books exploring hypothetical political regime change are based on the idea of a Jewish or Masonic conspiracy against Russia, whether explicitly expressed or implied. Jewish and Christian conspir-

\textsuperscript{31} See Aleksandr Asov, \textit{Slavianskie vedy} (Moscow: Fair-Press, 2003), \textit{Sviato-russkie vedy. Kniga Velesova} (Moscow: Fair-Press, 2007), in which he presents himself only as a translator and commentator of ancient texts, and his personal website, http://acov.m6.net/ where he renders several texts and explains his methods for reconstructing ancient knowledge.

\textsuperscript{32} “Mif kak mirvozzrenie,” www.svet.sva.name/mif.html

\textsuperscript{33} Aleksandr Belov, \textit{Ariiskie mify rusov} (Moscow: Amrita-Rus’, 2010), back cover.

\textsuperscript{34} “Belovod’e,” http://www.svet.sva.name/belovodie.html
acy theories against the original faith are particularly numerous and spread for example in Rodnoverie, the journal published by the Union of Slavic Communities. Some minority movements inspired by apocalyptic expectations tend to promise their members survival after the events threatening the future of the Earth.

The precepts of Rodnoverie are secrets not only because they are held by a chosen few, but also because they provide access to higher knowledge. Heavily influenced by Eastern religions, Buddhism, Shintoism, and Hinduism, Rodnoverie revalues esotericism as a higher knowledge, even though it is conventionally held in lower regard in Christianity. This knowledge is generally accessible in two non-contradictory ways. One stresses the need for a holistic world view that connects body, mind, and soul through physical practices inspired by yoga or the martial arts. The Association of Slavonic-Goritsa Wrestling was, in the 1990s, the best known of these groups. This method is not limited to Rodnoverie movements, but is common to all “patriotic” groups. Thus many military-patriotic clubs for children and adolescents now commonly offer a Russian version of martial arts called rukopashnyi boi and updated versions of so-called Slavic sports, which are often similar to judo or boxing.

For practitioners of these “national” sports, physical exercise allows the human mind to become aware of its inner strength and the intrinsic link that binds one to ancestors, thereby gaining access to a higher level of consciousness. The classic martial arts are said to favor a Buddhist background, which would be dangerous for Russian identity, while the national sports accentuate a Slavic consciousness, whether Vedic or Orthodox. For the majority of Rodnoverie, physical training, often militarized, plays a key role. At festivals, demonstrations of men’s physical strength in tournaments where teams symbolically compete are a sign of courage and the superiority of the Aryan/white race. It is also a metaphor for nature, such as the victory of spring over win-

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36 “Kul’tura Russkogo Apokalipsisa,” http://apocalypse-cult.org/about/
38 Interviews conducted by the author in 2009–2010 with those responsible for “Russian sports” in patriotic clubs for teenagers.
The idea that access to supernatural forces is a source of power over society is present in some texts, particularly among the most politicized groups that claim to exercise mind control and thus influence political decision-making, for example the K bogoderzhaviu. However, even if extrasensory phenomena are implicitly evoked, one cannot then consider Rodnoverie as a movement entirely oriented toward the paranormal.

Other groups give preference to symbolism; traditional animals such as wolves, ravens, and the phoenix are associated with specific gods, and prayers to their image allows one to intercede with the deity in question. Some ancient symbols, like geometric shapes or runic writings found during archaeological excavations, have also been reclaimed and endowed with new meanings. Finally, the six or eight branch swastika remains a key component of the accession to the upper world. For many Rodnoverie groups, the Orthodox cross is the Slavic version of the swastika (also called kolovrat in Russian), which can be found in Hinduism and Buddhism. Some Russian nationalists have been pushing this claim since the 1970s. Archaeological excavations suggest an association between the swastika and Svarog, the ancient Slavic god of the sun, which can justify this overlap. This interpretation is especially popular in groups for which Orthodoxy is not considered a single branch of a universal Christian religion, but the national religion of the Russian people, close to the authentic faith.

Certain groups engage in magical thinking, in particular the assumption of a link between language and cosmos, in an unacknowledged similarity to Kabbalah. This idea partly inspired the revival of the cult of names (imiaslavie), an old Orthodox tradition present until the beginning of the twentieth century in Orthodox monasteries on Mount Athos; it claims that the repetition of the name of God allows one to come closer to him. In Russian, the terms for pagan (iazychnik) and language (iazyk) have the same roots. This observation rein-

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40 “Obriadovye boi,” http://www.svet.sva.name/boi.html
44 Similar phenomena can be found in many Romance languages. For example, in French pagan (païen) and peasant (paysan) derive from the same word.
forces the convictions of some groups regarding the magical character of the Cyrillic alphabet, and its predecessor, the Glagolitic alphabet. The group Vseiasvetnaia gramota (Pan-Universal Charter) for instance thinks that the Cyrillic alphabet, in particular liturgical Old Slavonic, is endowed with a transcendent reality: certain Slavic letters could be keys to the cosmos or to extraterrestrial civilization, or endowed with supernatural powers that could be used by initiates. For the essayist Aleksandr Pleshanov, the Cyrillic alphabet is a way to communicate with heaven, as the letters have a hidden meaning that could predict major global disasters.

Occult principles also mark ritual practices. The main rites of Rodnoverie feature gestures and encoded chants that allow participants to enter into communion with the divine world, especially in rites of passage such as baptism with a pre-Christian name (imianarechenie), entry into the brotherhood (bratanie) marriage, and death. These rituals all take place in forests on specific sites that the group has previously sanctified. On the occasion of rituals dedicated to the gods (the days of Veles, Perun, and Svarog), some Rodnoverie groups like the Slavic Community of Briansk carve into wooden faces representing these gods and enter into communion with them, which is substantiated by the presence of an energy beam they claim to have photographed. The rituals of sacrifice (prinesenie treby), mainly agricultural products and kvas, also have hidden meanings, as does the lighting of fire (vozzhiganie ognia). The search for the occult enables group members to create their own codes, preferences, and borders, thus strengthening the sense of community among insiders.

Rodnoverie ideology is strongly influenced by the ideas of European Romanticism, specifically that cultural boundaries were born from nature and geography. Ethnicity must therefore be understood as territorialized, henceforth the importance accorded to the reconstruction of a Slavic/Aryan/Russian identity. However, some groups seem inspired by the other native faiths,
mainly those from the Uralic and Siberian populations. As such, shamanism benefits from a privileged status since it is considered as the best preserved and the most demonstrative ritual practice and enjoys international prestige outside Russia. The occult movement Belovod’e based in Barnaul describes for instance its provisions as a mix of traditions referring to “the mysterious studies of the people of Siberia, the Altai, and Central Asia, the hidden esoteric side of Russian pre-Christian beliefs and Shamanism. It teaches ancient magic, the art of healing, and the understanding of trees, animals, and Shamanism.”\textsuperscript{50} The Circle of Veles also tries to develop a kind of cult around white stones found in nature, probably inspired by the cults of anthropomorphic stones of Turkic-Mongolian peoples.\textsuperscript{51}

This animism insists on the sanctity of Earth and nature, and on the continuum between man and nature, but also has the territorialization of ethnicity as one of its political foundation. The re-sacralization of earth indeed enables indigenous movements to fight on their own ground, in Russia and elsewhere, asking for their rights as original inhabitants. Thus, the pioneer peoples who arrived late on already inhabited lands have a need to appropriate the cults of the earth of the peoples they dominated. The movements that are the most interested in this type of borrowing have tried to take part in the World Congress of Ethnic Religions (formerly the World Pagan Congress). One of the purposes of this association is precisely to gather in one association the contemporary movements coming from the United States and Europe, which are reconstructions, with the ancient religions of the “original peoples” such as Native Americans, African religions and Hinduism. As in the United States, some Russian ethnic faith movements try to draw on the religious arsenal of the rituals of the native peoples and old cosmogonies linked to the cult of the Mother Earth.

However, in contrast with Western New Age movements, in which female participation is dominant, Rodnoverie in Russia is not marked by feminine symbols. Despite the cult of “Mother Earth” and of fertility rituals, the Russian movements are mostly made up of men. Virility and masculine symbols are particularly visible, and some currents exalt warrior values. In addition, the narrative of Rodnoverie is very conservative in terms of its mores: its calls for heterosexuality, fidelity, and procreation. The sexual liberation dimension of the Western New Age is totally absent from it, and even disparaged.

\textsuperscript{50} See the website Belovod’e, http://www.vav.ru/belovod/.
\textsuperscript{51} “Belyi kamen,” http://bely-kamen.ru.mastertest.ru/
Conclusions

Rodnoverie is a contradictory, complex, and multifaceted phenomenon, but these adjectives should not be viewed as negative connotations. They are a sign of the vitality of the movement and its cultural resonance in contemporary Russian society. Rodnoverie presents itself as eminently postmodern and in the forefront of individualism and environmentalism. But at the same time, its followers demand a “return” to tradition, which has been marginalized by Russian-Soviet modernity, and they display their quest for cultural and religious “authenticity,” which could be rediscovered by purely and simply erasing the last millennium. Rodnoverie is thus simultaneously the willingness to “go back” and a kind of religious millenarianism turned toward the future. This paradoxical conjunction also joins the process of ethnicization of the divine, with ambiguous political consequences. Indeed seeking the rediscovery of a lost harmony between man and nature, or within a community, can easily drift towards xenophobic theories if the conception of this harmony is built on the exclusion of certain individuals or groups.

The underlying tensions are therefore intrinsic to Rodnoverie. It both celebrates natural multiplicity, because each nation is invited to cultivate its natural faith or ancestry, but also holds Slavic/Aryan characteristics in the highest regard; Rodnoverie condemns globalization that would erase cultural roots, but anchors itself in increasingly internationalized networks; it calls for the respect of nature, harmony between man and Earth, and a healthier life, as it flirts with occult practices of accession to superior and supernatural knowledge. The legacy of Soviet atheism can probably partly explain the Rodnoverie. Some of its arguments against historical religions are borrowed from Soviet anti-religious propaganda, for example that Christianity and Islam justified the exploitation of the lower classes and wars between nations. A portion of Russian society is interested in the revival of faith that emerged since perestroika. But traditional Orthodoxy, which is very institutionalized, moralistic, and somewhat out of tune with the modern world, is not appealing because it expects its faithful to comply with normative beliefs without room for interpretation.

On the contrary, Rodnoverie permits affirmations of faith without any regular ritual observance, or any theological background. It is limited to praise of

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Mother Earth, and leaves large areas of autonomy to the individual. This likely explains its success among educated young people and the cultivated middle classes, who find an answer to their spiritual needs, but to also their environmental concerns, individualism, and willingness to rebuild social networks based on a sense of community and brotherhood. The occult then plays a key role in rebuilding a relationship with lost traditions: the reconstitution of mythological knowledge, holistic mind and body exercises in order to access higher levels of consciousness, visual symbolism associated with ancestors, and prayers and rituals performed in nature in order to speak to the gods. The reference to anti-rational sources within occult traditions, already present in Soviet civilization but now in new forms, is very similar to ethnic revivals of faith in Western Europe. Rodnoverie therefore testifies to the vibrancy of esoteric quests in modern societies and undermines the idea that modernity signals the end of belief; the questioning by individuals of the hidden interactions between man, the cosmos, and a higher power via all kinds of initiatory practices is not about to disappear.