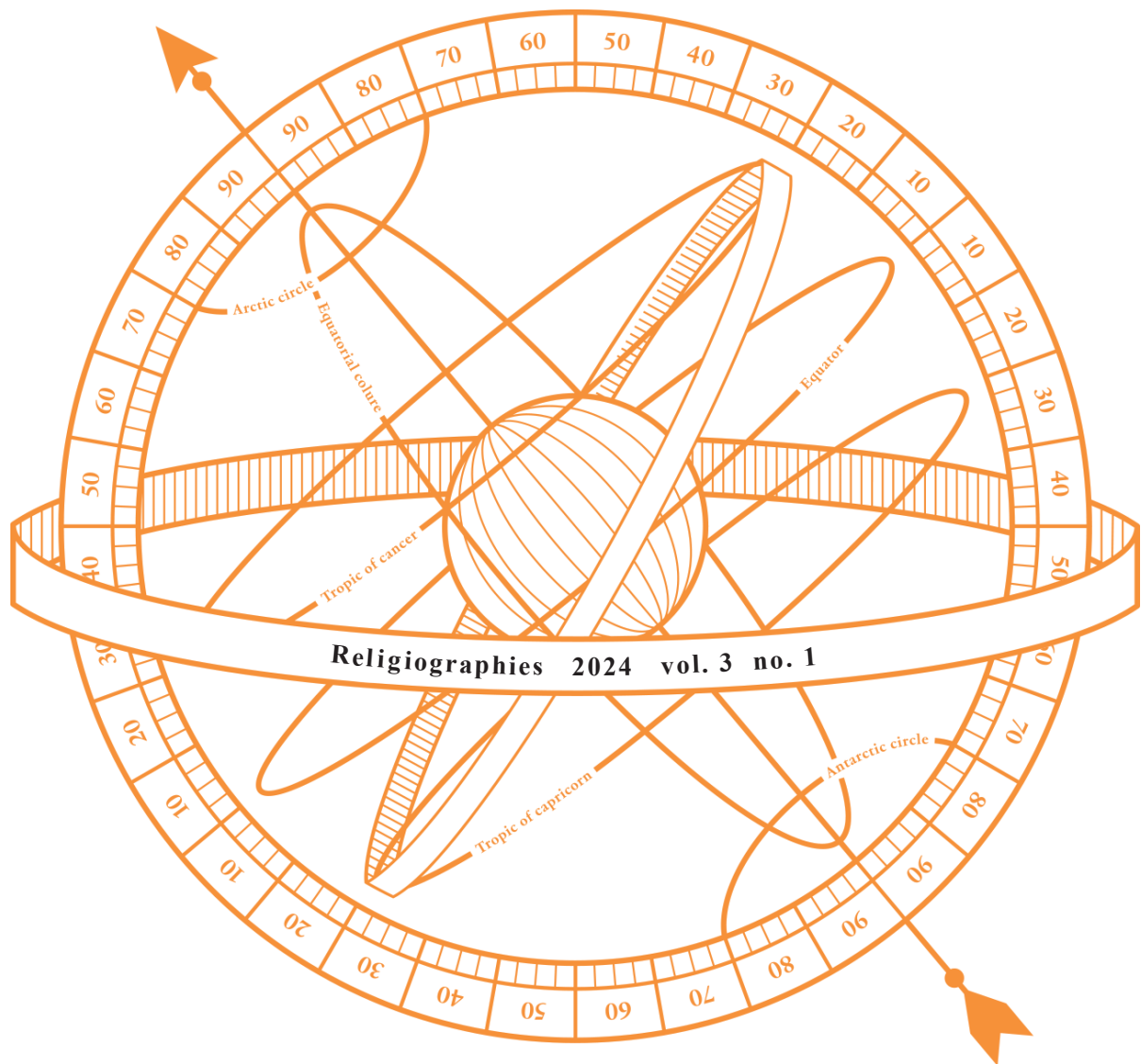


Religiographies



Special Issue

“Zoroastrian Esotericism”

edited by

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Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina

Inspired by Theosophy and Astrology: Esoteric Elements in Russian Zoroastrianism

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Keywords:

Neo-Zoroastrian, Astrology, Neo-Pagan,
Nativism, Post-Soviet, Theosophy,
Russia

To cite this:

Tessmann, Anna. “Inspired by Theosophy and Astrology: Esoteric Elements in Russian Zoroastrianism.” *Religiographies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2024): 75–91.

Abstract

The study of esoteric references in the context of Zoroastrianism may be exciting as it allows us to describe synthetic, hybrid discursive practices—defined by scholars or insiders as religious or secular—that are rare, understudied, or invisible. It is almost trivial to say that the religionist/phenomenologist conception of esotericism (an unusable, vague construct for comparisons) is doomed to epistemic failure, which precludes any joint work within “Zoroastrian Studies” or bringing them all together in a distinct theoretical framework for the study of “Zoroastrian esotericism.” More promising (also mixed) approaches in empirically grounded research into esoteric elements, structures, intersections, figures, and episodes of marginalization neglected in earlier scholarship can be developed through accurate sociocultural historicization, revision, or, if necessary, deconstruction of previous studies in the history of religions as well. This heuristic agenda is the only viable option for studying small communities of post-Soviet Zoroastrians and the sympathizers of the Zoroastrian religion who practice astrology and other forms of contemporary esotericism, heavily influenced, and changed by local cultural-historical contexts.



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Research Questions, Methods, and Sources

Considering the example of the Zoroastrian community in St Petersburg as one of the prominent representatives of Russian Zoroastrianism, this essay will respond to the questions posed by the editors of this special issue on “Zoroastrian esotericism” and evaluate whether establishing the theoretical framework of “Zoroastrian esotericism” can be heuristically justified. I will address the possibility of defining *esotericism* as *Zoroastrian*, and vice versa, by discussing the *emic* esoteric categories of the local believers and some of the occult components constituting their religion. In my study, I have applied interdisciplinary methods—elements of anthropological observation; *netnography*; “appointment anthropology,”¹ especially interviews, emails, and social media correspondence; and discursive analysis—and I have worked with diverse sources: *Zoroastrian* and *astrological* publications, individual opinions, and collective activities during which the Russian followers of the Zoroastrian religion reveal the “alternative” potential of their practice. After discussing the theoretical concepts of contemporary esotericism, I will touch upon the notions of Zoroastrian diversity in Zoroastrian Studies and briefly discuss several types of Zoroastrian communities in the post-Soviet space. Finally, I will focus on the St Petersburg Zoroastrian community, its origins in the (post-)Soviet New Age scene, and the set of esoteric elements and structures that are absent in the ethnic forms of contemporary Zoroastrianism in Iran and India, even in the diaspora—primarily theological and astrological forms—at the levels of belief, practice, and institution in the religion of Russian Zoroastrians.

Concepts of Esotericism as Analytic Instruments

Before starting the discussion on how *Zoroastrianism* and *esotericism* are connected in the practices of Russian Zoroastrians, it is necessary to explain what I understand by *esotericism* from a pragmatic point of view.

The *etic*, academic use of *esotericism* that foregrounds Western religious history is relatively new: in the study of religions, it appeared in the 1990s.² The construction of the research object within this concept, or what *esotericism* is, depends on the approach the scholar of religions will adopt in her or his work.³ The terms *esoteric* and *esotericism* originally presupposed a level of transmitting knowledge distinguished as “inner” within teachings or practices instead of a freely accessible level. Many individuals and communities in the history of religions adopted the idea of hierarchical secrecy (and in this sense, we cannot say that all such communities were marginal since secrecy was realized through access to “secret” teachings and practices within them).⁴ I understand the term *esotericism* in a discursive sense, referring to a range of religious texts and practices, e.g., different systems of religious knowledge, covering many topics such as Gnostic teachings, conspiracy, parascience, occult divination practices, etc. In this sense, my methodology of studying *esotericism* is close to the styles of discursive analysis proposed by the historian of religions, Kocku von Stuckrad, who views discourses as communicative structures that can organize knowledge in (religious) communities. Discourses are in-

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The term used by Tanya M. Luhrmann, *The Good Parsi: The Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), vii.

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Wouter Hanegraaff, “Esotericism,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden, Brill Publishers, 2006), 336–40, 339.

3

Wouter Hanegraaff examined five of them: “religionism, sociology, secrecy, discourse, and history.” Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Esotericism Theorized: Major Trends and Approaches to the Study of Esotericism,” in *Religion: Secret Religion*, ed. April D. DeConick (Farmington Hills: Macmillan, 2016), 155–70, 155f.

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I believe that esotericism, in contrast to *mysticism* (from Old Greek *mystikos*, “hidden, concealed”), in most cases, refers to marginal, neglected religious communities. Consequently, *mysticism* has long been recognized as part of the history of “monotheistic” or “world” religions. Especially within Christian religions, for instance, the Russian Orthodox Church tradition, one of the largest heirs of the Byzantine-Greek tradition, has inherited some practices of mystical praying in the framework of Christian apophatic (negative) theology. See Wolfgang Heller, “Russische Mystik,” in *Wörterbuch der Mystik*, ed. Peter Dinzelsbacher (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1989), 445–47.

tended to “establish, stabilize, and legitimize systems of meaning and provide collectively shared orders of knowledge in an institutionalized social setting; they are statements, utterances, and opinions about a specific topic that are systematically organized and repeatedly observable.”⁵

The concept of *esotericism* is interrelated with two other concepts in the study of religions that are connected or at least occupy neighboring territories—occultism and the New Age. All three concepts need to be kept in mind as they are an integral part of the toolkit for the study of various, often minor, contemporary forms of religion.

Esotericism and *occultism* (from Latin *occultus*, whose etymological meaning is “hidden”) are often used interchangeably and can be understood as well as used as comparative categories.⁶ According to Wouter Hanegraaff, the descriptive potential of *occultism* unfolds from two perspectives relating to (1) “the specifically French currents in the wake of Éliphas Lévi, flourishing in the ‘neo-Martinist’ context of Papus and related manifestations of fin-de-siecle esotericism”; and (2) “the *type* of esotericism that they represent” since ca. the mid-nineteenth century onward, which we can observe, for instance, in Spiritualism, Theosophy, the magical practices around the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and the *New Age* movement.⁷ Nevertheless, I believe it would be better to rely on one of the “applied” meanings of *occultism* as contemporary forms of divination arts⁸ or practices, tools, or “methods” of astrology, chiromancy, and others.⁹ In this meaning, *occultism* can be a constitutive part of *esotericism* and *New Age* in a specific historical context of the modern history of religions (from the mid-nineteenth century to now) and explain particular practices.

The *New Age* movement or *New Age* spirituality is conceptualized in the sociology of religion as a large complex of new forms of weakly or non-institutionalized groups and communities that came into being in the 1970s, gradually declined toward the mid-1990s, and revised or re-invented esoteric practices and occult divination arts of the past. Although various taxonomies of the *New Age* movement have been developed¹⁰ to express it, according to Gordon Melton, two ideas underlie the concept of this movement. “First, it predicted that a *New Age* of heightened spiritual consciousness and international peace would arrive and bring an end to racism, poverty, sickness, hunger, and war. This social transformation would result from the massive spiritual awakening of the general population during the next generation. Second, individuals could obtain a foretaste of *New Age* through their own spiritual transformation.”¹¹

Studies on Contemporary Zoroastrian Diversity

In the Western cultural reception at the origin of Oriental studies in Europe, Zoroastrianism has been one of the “classic” examples of an “Oriental religion” since the eighteenth century.¹² The academic study of Zoroastrianism, after its heyday in the first part of the twentieth century and as one of the central “areas of specialisation”¹³ of influential scholars of the history of religions, became a marginalized field of inquiry in the 1970s.¹⁴ With just a few exceptions, what prevailed was the study of Zoroastrianism by philological, archaeological, and historical

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Kocku von Stuckrad, “Esotericism Disputed: Major Debates in the Field,” in *Religion: Secret Religion*, ed. April D. DeConick (Farmington Hills: Macmillan, 2016), 171–81, 176.

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Karl Baier, “Esotericism,” in *Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. Robert A. Segal and Nickolas P. Roubekas, 2nd ed. (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2021), 229–40, 230f.

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See Wouter Hanegraaff, “Occult/Occultism,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden, Brill Publishers, 2006), 884–89, 888.

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See Thérèse Charmasson, “Divinatory Arts,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2006), 313–19.

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This view is close to the sociological distinction by Edward Tiryakian in “Towards the Sociology of Esoteric Culture,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 3 (1972): 491–512, here 265f.

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Olav Hammer, “New Age Movement,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. by Wouter Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 855–61.

11

J. Gordon Melton, “New Age movement,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 14, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/New-Age-movement>. Since the 2000s at least, we live, in J. Gordon Melton’s words, in the “post-*New Age*” era; the traces of this transnational movement are “evident in the number of *New Age* bookstores, periodicals, and organisations that [continue] to be found in nearly every urban centre.”

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John R. Hinnells, “Postmodernism and the Study of Zoroastrianism,” in *Zoroastrian and Parsi Studies Selected works of John R. Hinnells* (London: Routledge, 2018), 7–26, 10; Michael Stausberg and Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina, “Introduction: Scholarship on Zoroastrianism,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, ed. Michael Stausberg, Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina with Anna Tessmann (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2022), 1–18, 7.

13

Stausberg and Vevaina, “Introduction: Scholarship on Zoroastrianism,” 2.

14

Michael Stausberg, “On the State and Prospects of the Study of Zoroastrianism,” *Numen* 55, no. 5 (2008): 561–600, esp. 566.

(ancient history) approaches that primarily did not inform the current state of Zoroastrians or their practices. The scholars of Zoroastrianism did not reflect the recent changes in the theory and history of religions until the 1980s.¹⁵ According to John R. Hinnells, the most notable shift (he meant from the modernist to postmodernist trends) in “Zoroastrian studies”¹⁶ occurred in the works of his teacher, the influential but controversial scholar Mary Boyce (1920–2006). In the late-1970s, she began to explore neglected topics, for instance, the “importance of living and domestic practice, not least the emphasis on the role of the women, the awareness of the situatedness of herself and others, the blurring . . . of religious and secular distinctions,”¹⁷ and so on.

Michael Stausberg and Yuhana S.-D. Vevaina have recently disputed Hinnells’ “harmonising” attempt to reconstruct the study of Zoroastrianism, claiming that neither the “postmodern challenge” nor the *Orientalism* debate has played much of a role in the twentieth-century survey of Zoroastrianism.¹⁸ Moreover, they have seen a “disintegrated academic landscape” in it and called for a non-chronological picture of the scholarship, in which single critical scholars and their work are supposed to be responsible for the significant turns during the past three centuries. In Stausberg’s and Vevaina’s presentation of nine personalities, Mary Boyce is the first Western (only female) scholar in their list who “succeeded in integrating the study of Zoroastrianism into a consistent subject.” She is also the latest prominent scholar whose legacy, according to the authors, has continued until now.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the “post-Boycean” inquiry of Zoroastrianism has only reinforced the trend toward the heterogeneity of approaches and an acceptance of the contemporary diversity of Zoroastrianism, as John R. Hinnells suggested in his works on the Parsi diaspora world-wide.²⁰ Hinnells introduced a somewhat differentiated picture of the Zoroastrian religion, synthesizing social practices of other religions in the immediate environment, in most cases, far away from the scholarly constructions of old Iranian versions of Zoroastrianism based on the textual analysis of extremely few primary sources. In his view, a “religion is what it has become; that Zoroastrianism is what Zoroastrians do and believe when they consider that they are being Zoroastrian.”²¹ Thus, any contemporary variety of “Zoroastrianism” had to gain legitimacy as an object of study.

Some subsequent studies of modern Zoroastrianism in India reinforced this notion. Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Shehnaz Neville Munshi’s interview collection of Parsi Zoroastrianism in Mumbai in the 1990s showed that even Indian Zoroastrians viewed their ethnic religion as non-monolithic and often expressed their belonging to the Zoroastrian community in different ways.²² They grouped the collected material, namely interviews, around traditionalist, neo-traditionalist, modernist, and eclectic categories and were dedicated to discussing Zoroastrianism as cultural heritage trends in religious Parsi groups and movements.²³ The esoteric beliefs were also included.²⁴ The diversity of Parsi religious practices in the 1980s was also highlighted in an earlier study by the anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann in 1996.²⁵ In 2022, Mariano Errichiello’s doctoral thesis at SOAS of the University of London was dedicated to the esoteric *Ilm-e-Khshnoom* movement.²⁶

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Hinnells wrote that “(t)he modernist conviction that Western (all male), unbiased scholars could write ‘scientific,’ objective accounts of a clearly definable, homogeneous, unitary phenomenon, Zoroastrianism, whose essence is characterised by formal theological doctrines in ‘classical’ texts, underpinned Zoroastrian studies until the 1980s.” See Hinnells, “Postmodernism and the Study of Zoroastrianism,” 10.

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Hinnells, “Postmodernism and the Study of Zoroastrianism,” 18.

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Hinnells, 20.

18

Stausberg and Vevaina, “Introduction: Scholarship on Zoroastrianism,” 6.

19

Stausberg and Vevaina, 13.

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John R. Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora: Religion and Migration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

21

Hinnells, “Postmodernism and the Study of Zoroastrianism,” 22.

22

Philip G. Kreyenbroek in collaboration with Shehnaz Neville Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism: Urban Parsis Speak about their Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001).

23

See Yuhana S.-D. Vevaina, “No One Stands Nowhere: Knowledge, Power, and Positionality across the Insider-Outsider Divide in the Study of Zoroastrianism,” in *The Zoroastrian Flame: Exploring Religion, History and Tradition*, ed. Almut Hintze, Sarah Stewart, and Alan Williams (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 27–57, esp. 36–40, for a critique of these etic categories.

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Kreyenbroek and Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism*, 231ff.

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Luhrmann, *The Good Parsi*, 33. For instance, she described eclectic religious pictures in 1989 while observing a poor area in Mumbai: “All of the five or so rooms we visited had pictures of Zarathustra somewhere, along with Sai Baba (an Indian guru popular with Parsis), the Virgin Mary, and—less usual for Parsis—various Hindu deities.”

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Mariano Errichiello, “Ilme Kshnum: An Esoteric Interpretation of Zoroastrianism; History and Beliefs” (PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 2022).

Due to the political situation in the country after 1979, the study of modern Zoroastrians in Iran was much more complex than in India and the diaspora, so it was limited to a few anthropological studies and book projects.²⁷ The recent studies by Sarah Stewart in collaboration with Iranian scholars are significant as they have preserved the oral heritage in two collections of interviews with Iranian Zoroastrians from the urban centers of Tehran, Kerman, Ahvaz, Shiraz, Esfahan and the city of Yazd and surrounding villages.²⁸ However, the fragments from over 300 interviews present a picture of a relatively closed ethnic minority with locally formed, almost monolithic views of the Zoroastrian religion, even in urban settings, which contrasts with Kreyenbroek's and Munshi's description of Parsi Zoroastrianism. Stewart claimed that the "teaching of Zoroastrianism in Iran is defined by the quest for historical continuity within the literary tradition."²⁹

With his seminal social-historical studies on Zoroastrianism worldwide, the most comprehensive to date, Michael Stausberg mapped out the panorama of ethnic Indian and Iranian Zoroastrianism in the 1990s and the early 2000s. He included many descriptions of teachings and communities that, in previous centuries, were inspired (but not always accepted) by ethnic Zoroastrians.³⁰ Later on, Stausberg's work continued the discussion of alternative and diverse images of what contemporary Zoroastrianism could be. In one article, partly drawing on Richard Dawkins' theory of memes, he discussed seven cases of innovations in the history of Zoroastrianism. He claimed that "forms of elaborations and reconfigurations of Zoroastrian memes by persons who were not primarily socialised into (ethnic) Zoroastrianism"³¹ have created communities or "para-Zoroastrianisms." The examination of Russian Zoroastrianism outlined there adheres to the paradigm in Religious Studies that recognizes the variety within modern expressions of religious life. In Stausberg's view, it is an example of the practiced Zoroastrian religion, which can be interpreted as a particular "variety of 'para-tradition,' i.e., where cultural information has been replicated outside the line of ethnic transmission."³²

Origins, Types, and Tendencies of Russian Zoroastrian Communities

Local reinterpretations of Zoroastrian practices in the post-Soviet space, far away from India and Iran and any Western Zoroastrian diaspora, have been known since the early 1990s, and they have been under scholarly consideration since the 2000s.³³ In the eyes of scholars of religions, the communities, also in a discursive sense,³⁴ claiming to practice Zoroastrianism in this territory are distinguished by their place of origin. In this way, at least two categories can be distinguished. The first includes Central Asian groups (e.g., in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), which are now, as in the past, poorly studied. These communities were organized by local intellectuals who felt deeply connected to the ancient Iranian heritage and were initially open to international contacts. They viewed Zoroastrianism as a better alternative to expanding, diverse types of Islam and set themselves up as "cultural centers/houses." The second category is represented by Zoroastrian communities in other parts of post-Soviet Eurasia (Russia:

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See Sarah Stewart, "On the Problems of Studying Modern Zoroastrianism," *Oral Tradition* 35, no. 2 (2022): 251–66, esp. 253. Stewart has discussed the works by Mary Boyce, Michael Fischer, Janet Kestenberg-Amighi, and Navid Fozi. Nonetheless, she has not mentioned other scholars who have studied Iranian Zoroastrianism, such as German scholars Michael Stausberg or Robert Langer, and Beate Schmermbeck.

28

Sarah Stewart, *Voices from Zoroastrian Iran: Oral Texts and Testimony*, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018–2019).

29

Stewart, *Voices from Zoroastrian Iran: Oral Texts and Testimony*, 1:20.

30

See Michael Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras*, vol. 2, *Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002).

31

See Michael Stausberg, "Para-Zoroastrianisms: Memetic Transmissions and Appropriations," in *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, ed. John R. Hinnells and Alan Williams (London: Routledge, 2007), 236–54, here 251.

32

John R. Hinnells and Alan Williams, introduction to *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, ed. John R. Hinnells and Alan Williams (London: Routledge, 2007), 1–11, 10.

33

See Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras*, 2:332–34, 6f. Stausberg discussed Central Asia and Europe (Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine); Anna Tessmann, "Astrozoroastrismus in modernen Russland und Belarus," Unpublished Magistra Artia Thesis (Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, ZEGK, Institut für Religionswissenschaft, Heidelberg, 2005); Anna Tessmann, *On the Good Faith: The Fourfold Discursive Construction of Zoroastrianism in Modern Russia* (Stockholm: E-Print, 2012).

34

Tessmann, *On the Good Faith*, 28.

St Petersburg, Moscow, Perm, Novosibirsk; Belarus: Minsk, Vitebsk; Ukraine: Kyiv; Latvia: Riga; and others) that owed their emergence to a mass media celebrity, astrologer Pavel P. Globa (b. 1953). Most of them were an extension of or based on his astrological courses, which were later renamed *Avestan Schools of Astrology*. As a rule, these *Avestan astrology* groups, with a distinct predominance of women, have sought no other authority than Globa's as a "hereditary Zoroastrian (priest)," as he used to present himself in public at the beginning of his career as a Zoroastrian leader. With a few exceptions, they have not tried to gain any further acceptance from Indian and Iranian Zoroastrians. Parallel to them, and sometimes based on *Avestan astrology*, there have been neo-Zoroastrian trends in the 2000s, inspired in many ways by Central Asian and Iranian converts who wanted to feel part of the global "ethical," non-ethnic neo-Zoroastrian movement (the early Moscow *Russian Anjoman*).³⁵ That is why Zoroastrianism in Russian urban settings may be considered contemporary, almost conflict-free "cross-cultural appropriation,"³⁶ and a new religion in its own right, expressing different "living styles" of Zoroastrianism. These living styles have been shaped by the persistent assertion of a "Zoroastrian identity" in the public sphere (in newspapers, on TV, and on the Internet: *YouTube*, *WhatsApp*, and *Telegram* messengers³⁷), a supportive legal framework onsite for so-called "traditional" religions (from time to time officially registered as "religious communities"), as well as regularly performed rituals in individual and collective social contexts over the past thirty years. However, since their official registration in the mid-1990s, Russian Zoroastrian communities have continually restructured their practices, beliefs, and institutions. It is worth considering that these doctrinal and ritual changes took place in virtual isolation from foreign Zoroastrian communities, against the background of exchanges with other mainly Russian neopagan groups. Such re-arrangements have often been negotiated as schisms and inner conflicts, and gradually, communities have become self-regulated, weakly hierarchized groups. Over time, it became clear that the Zoroastrian branch in post-Soviet Eurasia, originating from the *Avestan astrological schools*, turned out to be the most stable community, albeit gradually dwindling. Occasionally, and to a minimal extent, it has also been supported by some Parsi individuals and organizations (including Meher Master-Moos organizations, i.e., *Mazdayasnie Monasterie*; *Zoroastrian College*; *All India Shah Behram Baug Society*), some Iranian *mobedyars*, the Swedish *Zoroastrian Universal Community*, and maintained many contacts (mainly written communication) with various American Zoroastrian organizations (for instance, the *Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America* [FEZANA]). Prolonged observation of practitioners and their activities allows us to see the relationship between constant and changing elements and enables us to attempt some diachronic comparisons.

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Tessmann, *On the Good Faith*, 101.

36

See Michael Stausberg and Anna Tessmann, "The Appropriation of a Religion: The Case of Zoroastrianism in Contemporary Russia," *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 14, no. 4 (2013): 445–62.

37

At the beginning of 2023, the St Petersburg WhatsApp group, to which I was invited in 2021 by a *khordad* of the Zoroastrian community, numbered 64 participants and was led by two admins; a year later, there were 69 of them. The Telegram group has 94 subscribers, including foreign Zoroastrians (May 2024: 159).



Fig. 1–2. The Russian translation of the *Khorde (Small) Avesta* by Mikhail Chistiakov, 2005, used by the *khorbad* of the community in St Petersburg during the weekly rituals and festivals. © Mikhail Chistiakov.

To sketch out the religious practices of Russian Zoroastrianism, I would like to focus on the religion of the *Zoroastrian community of St Petersburg*. Since its official establishment in 1994, this community has been an offshoot of the local Avestan astrological school and a kind of “showcase” of Russian Zoroastrianism. Some of its most constant elements refer to astrological and autochthonous interpretations of Zoroastrian beliefs and ritual practices, including those that are esoteric. Despite the tiny number of members (regular community meetings are currently held in a rented room in the northwest of the city by usually 3–5 people),³⁸ the consolidating ritual, which to a greater extent shapes their (Russian) Zoroastrian identity (in addition to home prayers of individual Zoroastrians), is a liturgy in front of the altar with a metal *afri-nagan*-fire vase. The arrangement of the prayers was established by the first junior leader (*mladshii nastoiatel*’, literary “junior dean/rector”) of the community, Mikhail Chistiakov, who was appointed to this office by Globa, the senior leader (*starshii nastoiatel*’). Globa practically did not perform any rituals except initiations at the very beginning of the community’s formation. After that, he had only a remote function as a leader. Chistiakov described the structure of the Zoroastrian liturgy proper as he understood it in 2005 in his translated Russian collection of *Khorde Avesta*.³⁹ There, he showed that even though a Zoroastrian liturgy consists of obligatory sequences, the believers can construct some parts during home prayers. Chistiakov’s book is a compilation of Ervad Maneck Furdoonji Kanga’s *Khordeh Avesta* (1993), with transliteration and Russian translation from English. The priest in charge of the Zoroastrian community, Chistiakov’s successor, continues to follow the same order. According to him, the liturgy usually begins with the tying of the sacred girdle *kushti* and *Srosh baj*, followed by a *Gah* (a prayer for one of the five periods of the day, most often *Uzerin*) and *Yasht* (a hymn to the deity of the day [Solar calendar], the so-called *central prayer* of their liturgy). *Ahuna vairyo* and other Zoroastrian

38
Aleksandra Zasiad’ko, “What Does It Mean to Be a ‘Russian Zoroastrian’?: Mimetic (Re)Creation of ‘Tradition’ in ‘Zoroastrians of St Petersburg’ Community” (master’s thesis, European University of St Petersburg, 2023), 18, in Russian.

39
Mikhail Chistiakov, trans, *Avesta. Khorde Avesta (Mladshaiia Avesta)* (Sankt-Peterburg: n.p., 2005), 14ff, in Russian.

manthras are an integral part of diverse sequences. The routine ceremony concludes with reciting final prayers and blessings, such as confessions to Ahura Mazda and the Zoroastrian faith (*Doa Nam Setayesh* and *Din-no-Kalmo*). Some lines of Avestan prayers are duplicated in the Russian language. Generally, the junior leader or a *khorbād* takes the lead in the ceremony in the community space.⁴⁰ He stands closer to the fire and reads prayers from a book while the rest of the participants try to pray with him. This is not always possible because the “lay people” often do not know the prayers by heart. The liturgy, called *bogsluzhenie* (divine service), or *ritual* (ritual), ends in communion with a sip of red wine. The second part of the “meeting” in the community, as explained on the website, consists of a tea party, where, among other things, a “tea drink from Rosebay willowherb (*Ivan-chai*), collected in ecologically clean places”⁴¹ is offered to the community members and their guests. This tea, an “original Russian beverage,” is a favorite of Russian New Agers and ecovillagers close to neopagan groups; it is widespread among *Anastasians*.⁴² Currently, this liturgy is performed collectively every week and on various Zoroastrian holidays, such as the Spring New Year Nouruz, or six seasonal festivals, such as *gahanbars*, and translated on the *Telegram Messenger* channel *Zoroastriitsy Sankt-Peterburga* (St Petersburg Zoroastrians) with 159 subscribers.

Even though the Zoroastrian community was founded as a truly independent, “traditional” religious organization and is declared as such in its official documents and statutes, it cannot be considered in isolation from its environment, which is understood both in a broader sense as a socio-political, in this case Russian, post-Soviet background, and in a narrower but no less critical sense as part of the permanent *cultic milieu* or a milieu of *Avestan astrology* groups. We cannot foresee the extent to which Russian Zoroastrianism will disappear in just one generation or experience another revival in the future, as the adherents hoped and continued to wish for in their interviews in 2023.⁴³ However, it is clear that after the flourishing of the *Avestan astrological schools* in the 1990s and their gradual decline in the 2000s, the number of people who consider themselves Russian Zoroastrians has also declined sharply to a few hundred at most. The inflow of new, younger community members is relatively negligible. This gradual decline seems to be continuing.

Russian Zoroastrianism in Context of the (Post-)Soviet New Age

The tendencies and parameters characterizing this type of Russian Zoroastrianism (also called Astro-Zoroastrianism⁴⁴) in the St Petersburg Zoroastrian community are diverse. Its esoteric component(s)—even if seemingly essential to the untrained eye—do not indicate a specific type of “Zoroastrian esotericism”; rather, they are just a few of the identity markers⁴⁵ that bring it closer to the particular forms of local *New Age* religiosity that emerged in the Soviet urban underground in the 1970s and spread in the 1990s. This *New Age* religiosity is first and foremost obliged to intellectual history and the reading and reception of popular occultism, mysticism, and philosophical literature that spread in imperial Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century and has been preserved in the Soviet Union in libraries and private



Fig. 3. The *khorbād* of the Zoroastrian community, performing a communal ritual with a live translation on the community’s Telegram channel, 2024. Photograph © *Zoroastriitsy Sankt-Peterburga*.

40

An innovative spelling from Middle Persian *hērbed* or *hērbad* (corresponding to modern *ervad* in India and *mobedyar* in Iran), the lowest grade of the Zoroastrian priesthood in modern times. See Philip G. Kreyenbroek, “Hērbed,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, December 15, 2003, accessed August 10, 2024, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/herbed>.

41

See <https://zoroastrian.ru/node/1027>.

42

Julia Andreeva, “Traditions and the Imagined Past in Russian Anastasian Intentional Communities,” *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 15, no. 2 (2021): 25–42, esp. 33 ff.

43

Aleksandra Zasiad’ko, “In Search of ‘Community,’” Unpublished Seminar Paper (St Petersburg, March 7, 2023), in Russian.

44

Tessmann, “Astrozoroastrismus,”; Stausberg, “Para-Zoroastrianisms,” 250.

45

Yet once again, it is not limited to it alone because it also contains “traditionalist,” elements shared with Parsis and Iranians.

collections. It also used to exist in the circulation of esoteric *samizdat* self-published and secretly copied or reprinted literature.⁴⁶

During the Soviet period, esoteric groups, as well as any other organizations offering an alternative to state structures, which were based on the philosophy of materialism and atheism, were persecuted for ideological reasons. As a result, most people interested in any kind of religion or mysticism had to rely on finding and reading such literature.⁴⁷ Born in the early 1950s, Globa was an active seeker in the late Soviet cultic milieu.⁴⁸ According to some testimonies, he participated in groups and “spiritual” training in the Moscow underground in the 1970s and gradually gained ground as an astrology teacher and, then, as a charismatic leader of many astrological groups scattered throughout the post-Soviet space.⁴⁹ In the early 1980s, he and his colleagues began to meet in private apartments, where they discussed occult literature or organized paid astrology courses. Globa’s television career as an astrologer began in the late 1980s. This was illegal because private entrepreneurship had been banned in the 1960s and was punished by the Soviet authorities since the *Law on individual labor activity*, which allowed entrepreneurship, was not passed until 1986.



Fig. 4. Tamara and Pavel Globa discussed Avestan astrology, Zervanite teaching, and theosophical races in the TV program *Around the World* on May 13, 1991.

So, looking back, the contemporary New Agers’ interest in Zoroastrianism is related to at least two aspects. The first is an attraction for non-European, Oriental religions in general, a process known as the “Easternization” of the European religious space.⁵⁰ The second aspect, in particular, is the long tradition of European reception of the Zoroastrian religion as an exoticism, especially regarding the figure of Zoroaster portrayed as a mystic who gained secret knowledge and possessed a special gift of divination.⁵¹ Both were intensified from the *fin de siècle* until World War I and found their expression in the literary, philosophical, and historical works of the time. These tendencies are also found in the publications of French occultists and the transnation-

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See for this period, Ryan, W. F., *The Bathhouse at Midnight: An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999); Faith Wigzell, *Reading Russian Fortunes: Print Culture, Gender, and Divination in Russia from 1765* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Julia Mannherz, *Modern Occultism in Late Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012).

47

Boris Falikov, “Books Instead of Lineage: Mystic Underground in the USSR (1960s–1980s),” *New Age in Russia*, July 24, 2022, accessed August 10, 2024, <https://newageru.hypotheses.org/?p=6614>.

48

Colin Campbell, “The Cult, The Cultic Milieu and Secularization,” in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 5:119–36.

49

Cf. Aleksandr Zaraev, *The Way to the Stars: When Horoscopes Come True* (Moscow: Èksmo, 2017), 47, in Russian.

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Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 118.

51

Michael Stausberg, “Zarathustra Post-Gothic Trajectories,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, ed. Michael Stausberg, Yuhon Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina with Anna Tessmann, 69–81 (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2022), 71, 73; Jenny Rose, *The Image of Zoroaster: The Persian Mage Through European Eyes* (New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2000); Michael Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra. Zoroaster und die europäische Religionsgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998).

al *Theosophical Society* (a harbinger of the New Age Movement of the 1970s). The founders of the Theosophical Society, Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) and, especially, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), were interested in the Zoroastrian religion and tried to link it to their vision of occultism through public lectures, which attracted many followers among Parsis.⁵² We find many of their ideas in later theosophical works. For instance, Annie Besant (1847–1933) saw Zoroaster in the chain of other great sages of humanity as the “World Teacher of the third Aryan sub-race, who initiated the Aryanization of Persia.”⁵³ At the beginning of the twentieth century, Theosophy also inspired astrology. This was characterized by the “affinity of many of its practitioners with theosophy and with the gradual transition from an event-oriented to a psychologizing practice,”⁵⁴ and this “double affiliation” affected literature on the astrology of the period.



Fig. 5. Zarathushtra’s Mountain at the confluence of two rivers, Kama and Chusovaya, Perm Krai, Russia, 2005. © Oleg Lushnikov.

Yet, once again, the discourses on Zarathushtra and the Zoroastrian religion developed after World War II. They spread in the mass culture of Western societies and globally from the late 1960s onwards. Moreover, we should not underestimate the further “end products” of the appropriation of the Zoroastrian religion in the twentieth century by various discourses, not only religious discourses, and especially at the beginning of this century, as significant structural and technological changes were taking place. Simultaneously, the desire for radical change and rebellion are precisely the qualities that symbolize the Nietzschean Zoroaster figure, highly influential among intellectual elites throughout the twentieth century. In this regard, the Russian Empire and the Soviet state were no exception. In the post-World War II period in the Soviet Union, such ideas were transmitted secretly through *samizdat* literature.⁵⁵

The contextual account sketched out above, while necessary for

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See Kreyenbroek, *Living Zoroastrianism*, 48; Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras*, 2:112ff; Prods Oktor Skjærvø and Daniel J. Sheffield, “Zoroastrian, Scriptures,” in *Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism*, ed. Zayn R. Kassam, Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, and Jehan Bagli (Dordrecht: Springer, 2018), 790–804, 809.

53

Isaac Lubelsky, “Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy,” *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2013), 335–55, 349.

54

Olav Hammer, “Astrology V: 20th Century,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden, Brill Publishers, 2006), 136–41, 139.

55

Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, ed., *Nietzsche in Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

historically grounded studies of religions, is not comprehensive,⁵⁶ but we must understand how the trans-European reception of ethnic Zoroastrianism and the figure of the Prophet Zarathushtra attracted the attention of post-Soviet New Agers and became the motivation for the creation of a new religion. This should help us to understand the context-text intersections and set up some esoteric elements and structures, which I will examine at the simplified but interconnected levels of (1) belief, (2) practice, and (3) institutionalization among the St Petersburg Zoroastrian community.

Spiritual Leadership, Exclusivity of Belief, and Multiple Levels of Secrecy

Doubtlessly, the “original” meaning of Zoroastrianism in Globa’s and his followers’ eyes has been contingent upon several historical works devoted to the studies of ancient Zoroastrianism.⁵⁷ The discussion of “authentic” or “proper” Zoroastrianism has taken one of the central places in the pages of the magazine of the Zoroastrian community, *Mitra* (1997–2017), and Globa’s seminal books *Living Fire* (1996, 2008) and *Teaching of the Ancient Aryans* (2007), the anonymous booklet *Zervan-Zoroastrianism* (1997), inspired by theosophical ideas of races in a compilation edited by one of Globa’s students, and many other sources such as astrological and Zoroastrian conference speeches.⁵⁸

In his recent study on secrecy, analyzing the *Theosophical Society*, Hugh Urban inferred that “Blavatsky’s secret doctrine remains among the clearest examples of the central paradox inherent in most forms of religious secrecy. This is the paradox that we can call the advertised secret, as the active cultivation of a public reputation of concealed knowledge. This paradox involves not only the use of a complex ‘language of secrecy’ and ‘occult rhetoric’ but also the cultivation of an entire occult personality—an occult *habitus* or mode of being that includes dress, comportment, mannerisms, and speech that generates the aura of secret knowledge and hidden power.”⁵⁹

This paradox of the “advertised secret” explains some strategies of contemporary astrologers with their prognoses in the public sphere, as well as Globa’s active public promotion of Zoroastrianism as a “secret wisdom.” The self-presentation and construction of his teaching with different spheres and levels of accessibility strongly resemble theosophical ideas in their older, *fin de siècle* fashion.⁶⁰ Globa’s “occult habitus” manifests itself in dress and gestures and a certain *modus operandi* of rhetorical silence. In other words, he consciously worked on his own image as a “spiritual teacher,” who, in public speeches and numerous interviews, turned out to be much higher than the “spiritual level” of his students. Some of his former colleagues and followers have mentioned experiencing a special state of mind during Globa’s astrology lectures, even after listening to them on tape recordings. Although they have criticized his fickle assertions and prediction mistakes, most also recognized Globa’s extraordinary visionary abilities.⁶¹

In a very similar “theosophical” way, Globa distinguished two levels in teaching Zoroastrianism: inner and outer, *esoteric* and *exoteric*. At this point, it should be noted that on the level of references, Globa draws on texts that were themselves held as authoritative by theoso-

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John P. Burris, “Text and Context in the Study of Religion,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 15, no. 1 (2003): 28–47, esp. 29f.

57

Especially in the translations into Russian like Mary Boyce’s *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (1979; repr., London: Routledge, 2002), in Russian, the book was published four times: in 1987, 1988, 1994, and 2003; Robert Charles Zaehner was also very influential with his studies *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955). Zaehner’s book *The Teachings of the Magi: A Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs* (University of Michigan: Allen & Unwin, 1956) was translated and published by Globa’s followers with his preface criticizing the idea of Zurvanism as “Zoroastrian heresy” in the early 1990s.

58

Pavel Globa, *The Living Fire* (Moscow: Vagrius, Iauza, 1996; Èksmo, Iauza, 2008), in Russian; Pavel Globa, *The Teaching of the Ancient Aryans* (Moscow: Èksmo, Iauza, 2007); Pavel Globa, “Zervanism is a Clandestine Teaching of Zoroastrianism,” *Mitra* 2, no. 6 (2000): 6–13; Pavel Globa, “A Course Toward Zervano-Zoroastrianism,” *Mitra* 9, no. 13 (2007): 57–65. See also the discussion in Tessmann, *On the Good Faith*, 50, 52ff.

59

Hugh Urban, *Secrecy: Silence, Power, and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 76.

60

Urban, *Secrecy*, 76.

61

For instance, A.M. (Interviewed by the author, St Petersburg, November 25, 2018).

phists and some Parsis, such as the *Dasatir*, a mystical compilatory work published in the Persian Sufi milieu in the sixteenth century.⁶² In reaching the first level, he asserts the importance of genealogical affiliation to the secret ancestral tradition, especially in relation to his somewhat legendary grandfather, Ivan N. Gantimurov, whose maternal ancestors were supposed to be of Iranian descent (and, he believes, of Zoroastrian, or even particularly “secret Zoroastrian” or so-called *Zervanite* descent).⁶³ According to Globa, his grandfather, who tried to build the first Zoroastrian temple in Russia, was supported by Iranians and Azerbaijanis living in St Petersburg, but the idea was never realized.⁶⁴ For his students who, of course, cannot claim to belong to the priestly class of secret *Zervanites* as he did or even to be Zoroastrian by birth, this level of involvement in Zoroastrian teaching is inaccessible. It was understood that Globa’s Russian followers could improve their knowledge and practice rituals, but in his opinion, their potential would remain very limited.

Surprisingly, the Western and traditionalist construction of *Zoroastrianism* as a religion based on the sacred scriptures (the *Avesta*) and transmitted by Ahura Mazda through his prophet Zarathustra to the people, also plays out on the level of the invention of Russian Zoroastrianism. Similarly, Globa articulated a special, true doctrine (*Zervanism*) that manifests itself through a book (*Zervan-namag*) (or rather, he transforms and adds to what is already known from books). Globa appeared as a New Age prophet who taught people how to distinguish the *true* teaching from the *false* teaching and *make a (proper) choice* at the beginning of the coming new (*Aquarian*) era.

In the 1990s, Globa insisted on the exclusivity of his *Zervanite* belief in relation to the historical perspective; later, it gradually faded into the background, especially in public speeches. Similar to many other esotericists operating in the vivid post-Soviet “religious market,” he offered a version of Zoroastrianism that was interpreted as descending from “ancient secret knowledge.”⁶⁵ Thus, in Globa’s opinion, Zoroastrianism was divided into two main currents: *Zoroastrianism/Mazdeism*⁶⁶ and *Zervanism* (spelled as *Zurvanism* in academic works). Even though Mazdeism can be understood as a prototype of contemporary Zoroastrianism, its valuable essence was “esoteric Zoroastrianism” or *Zervanism*,⁶⁷ the teaching that was named after the main deity *Zervan*, conceptualized in two guises as *finite* and *infinite time*. The esoteric tradition of *Zervanism* had to have a particular canon and rituals, which differed from the “orthodox” Zoroastrian tradition but is completely hidden. In terms of religion and in strict opposition to his followers, Globa describes himself as the only “real” *Zervanite* and mage in the entire territory of the former Soviet Union. He also emphasizes that he cannot exclude some *Zervanites* “allegedly living in Tajikistan.” He was convinced that there is also an Iranian *Zervanite* community that continues to exist near Tabriz in Iran.⁶⁸

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Pavel Globa, “Zervanism,” 9. See Kreyenbroek and Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism*, 49.

63

Tessmann, “Astrozoroastrismus,” 58.

64

Tessmann, *On the Good Faith*, 79.

65

Demyan Belyaev, *Geographie der alternativen Religiosität in Russland: Zur Rolle des heterodoxen Wissens nach dem Zusammenbruch des kommunistischen Systems* (Heidelberg: Selbstverlag des Geographischen Instituts der Universität, 2008), 55.

66

The term *Mazdeism* goes back to the Zoroastrians’ self-designation as *mazdaiiasna*—“Mazdā worshipper” in the Av. ritual texts. Cf. Michael Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras*, 1:8. This name of the Zoroastrian religion as Mazdeism was quite common in the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century in the European area.

67

Mary Boyce’s school understood Zurvanism (from Avestan *zruuān*, time) as being an alternative religious current to official Sasanian Zoroastrianism, a so-called Zoroastrian “heresy” (M. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 2, *Under the Achaemenians* [Leiden: Brill, 1982], 231f). In recent scholarly literature, it has been described as a “variant of Zarathustrian mythology,” a Zoroastrian creation myth. See Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras*, 1:245ff., 480. Shaul Shaked wrote: “The myth of Zurvan, a myth of creation which presents an alternative to the official Zoroastrian version, enjoyed great popularity in the Sasanian period but does not seem to have established itself as a distinct religion or sect, and apparently did not have the structure of a religious community.” See Shaul Shaked, “Religion in the Late Sasanian Period: Eran, Aneran, and Other Religious Designations,” in *The Idea of Iran*, vol. 3, *The Sasanian Era*, ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 111.

68

Tessmann, “Astrozoroastrismus,” 93.

At the beginning of his “Zoroastrian” mission, Globa explained to the students that the “philosophical foundations” of Zoroastrianism are most accurately outlined in a certain compiled Pahlavi scripture, *Zervan-namag*, which is still unknown to scholars. In this way, Globa (perhaps unconsciously) repeats the strategy of earlier esotericists, the closest example of which is again Blavatsky, highly influential in the (post-)Soviet *cultic milieu*. Blavatsky claimed that her *Secret Doctrine* (1888), translated in the 1930s by a Russian theosophist and one of the inventors of *Agni Yoga*, Helena Roerich, and distributed in *samizdat* after World War II, was nothing more than a commentary on the “secret” book of *Dzryan/Dzan* in which seven stanzas were about cosmic evolution (*Cosmogogenesis*)⁶⁹ and twelve described the true creation of man (*Anthropogenesis*). Similarly, the *Book of Dzryan* itself was shown to Blavatsky in her own words only during a visit to a Tibetan monastery and has never been studied by any scholar.

According to Globa, the relatively old manuscript was a handwritten collection of all sorts of fragments of Persian texts, not entirely coherent, now in Globa’s possession and available to no one except him. In his lectures given in the early 1990s, Globa quoted some passages and re-told myths “of the *Zervan-namag*.” From the nature of the statements, this should be imagined as a (fictional) literary work compiled from the reception of mystical, Gnostic, Pythagorean, Neoplatonic, and Hinduist elements. Some of the mentioned concepts and terms can be understood only against the background of Hindu beliefs (e.g., *zarma*, meaning *karma*) or contemporary esoteric discourses and concepts.

The references to *Zervanism* and *Zervan-namag* cross the imaginary bridge to *Avestan astrology* (“every *Zervanite* was an astrologer”). As for astrological ideas and the system of horoscopes crystallized out of *Zervanite* or similar heritages, they represent a compilation of Zoroastrian mythology, modern Western astrological teachings, and original interpretations.⁷⁰ The concept of *khvarna* (from Avestan *xʷarənah-* “[divine/royal, etc.] glory, shine, highness, majesty” with later interpretations outside the Zoroastrian tradition, for instance, in occultism) has conventional meanings but is understood by Globa as belonging to the context of New Age holistic healing practices, “positive Cosmic energy,” and the occult term *egregor* (for instance, “Zoroastrian *egregor*”) (from Greek ἐγρήγορος, *egrēgoros* “wakeful” but reinterpreted in an occult sense by English theosophist and astrologer Alan Leo or mystic writer Daniil Andreev, who saw in it “other-material formations that arise from some psychic extractions of humanity over large collectives”⁷¹). This concept easily fit into the worldview of Globa and his followers and harmonized with other components. As such, however, they are primarily linked to both the late Soviet New Age milieu and its esoteric *lingua franca*.

Practicing Avestan Astrology

Even though astronomical and astrological elements in Young Avestan, and especially in Pahlavi texts, occupy a prominent place, they are neglected in most scholarly works. The reason may have been the premise that “astrology has been an implicit embarrassment to all views of

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The same title is given to one of the first published *Astro-Zoroastrian* transcripts of Globa’s lectures: Pavel Globa, *Cosmogogenesis: The Avestan School of Astrology*, Published records of lectures, 1991 (St Petersburg: n.p., n.d.), in Russian.

70

Tessmann, “Astrozoroastrismus,” 99.

71

Daniil Andreev, *The Rose of the World* (Moscow: Mir Uranii, 2002), 143, in Russian.

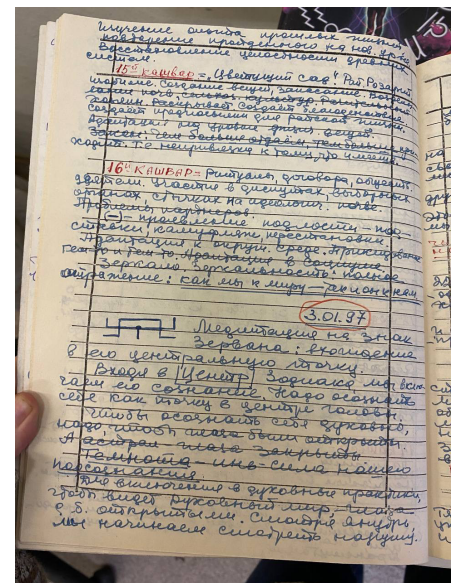


Fig. 6. Fragment of a handwritten transcript of one lecture at the *Avestan School of Astrology* in St Petersburg in 1997, describing a *Zervan* meditation. Photograph by Aleksandra Zasiad’ko, 2023, © The Zoroastrian Community of St Petersburg.

Zoroastrianism that take the doctrine of free will and ethical choice as the fundamentals of the religion.”⁷² However, according to Enrico Raffaelli’s latest studies, the Pahlavi texts show that the Zoroastrian written tradition in the Sassanian and early Islamic periods retained the capacity for “intellectual creativity that had previously allowed it to include and adapt to its theological corpus notions and doctrines of multifarious type and origin,” including astrological beliefs.⁷³ Since the late 1990s, astrology has been the subject of textual research into ancient Zoroastrianism. Still, astrology practiced inside contemporary Zoroastrianism, such as that of the Parsis, has so far remained outside the scope of scholarly consideration.

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See Michael Stausberg, “On the State,” 576.

73
Enrico G. Raffaelli. “Astrology and Religion in the Zoroastrian Pahlavi Texts,” *Journal Asiatique* 305, no. 2 (2017): 171–90, here 187.

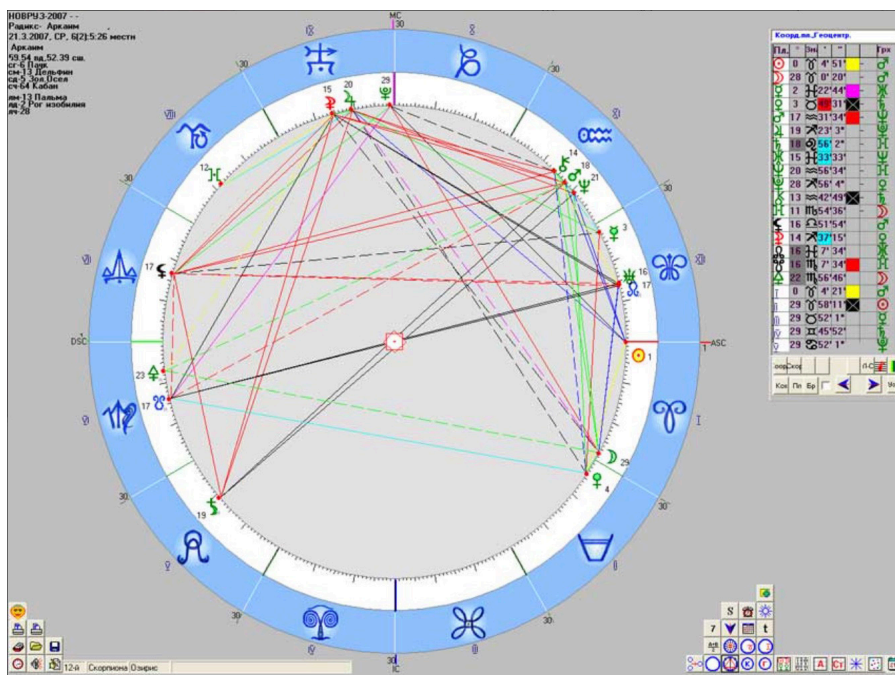


Fig. 7. Natal chart of the archaeological site of Arkaim, made with the help of the astrological program *Astro-Zero*, using particular (“Zervan-Zoroastrian”) signs for some planets and Zodiac signs, on the day of Nouruz, 21.3.2007. © Pavel Volynkin.

As surprising as the “revival” of an unknown post-Soviet *Avestan astrology* may seem, this reinvention appears to me to be entirely rational in the vein of New Age spirituality and its relentless agenda to “fill in the gaps” left by academic research in the analysis of Pahlavi or Avestan astrological beliefs, and in fact to create new meanings. In the popularization of *Avestan astrology*, at least two aspects played a significant role: (1) the presence of astrological ideas and their fragments in Zoroastrian literature, which was translated into Russian by scholars, and (2) new insights into psychological and philosophical astrology in the twentieth century (reprints and translations of the influential theosophists Alan Leo [1875–1917] and Dane Rudhyar [1895–1985] were circulating in Soviet samizdat). In the lengthy discussions about free will and predicting the future, these two aspects eliminated this contradiction, transforming astrology into a therapeutic tool. Given the Soviet people’s growing interest in their own “Orient”—Central Asia, impacted by Iranian culture and languages—Globa, a historian-archivist by profession and a gifted New Age bricoleur by nature, had no difficulty in initiating his own style of astrology based on the myth

of “secret Zoroastrians” and “mystical initiations.” For him, astrology is a part of “clandestine knowledge” (ergo *Zervanism*), “language of God,” “sacral science,” and at the same time, “sacred art,” which helps to make the “proper choice” for the “right” position in the world, also for the Zoroastrian religion.⁷⁴ Although in recent *YouTube* videos, Globa insists that he “developed (earlier, he used to say that he inherited this astrological tradition and was just sharing it with others [A.T.] the *Avestan astrology* in the past 45 years,”⁷⁵ *Avestan astrology* was presented in the early 1990s as a revival of lost “traditional” knowledge. As to the New Age milieu, they have often been characterized by the “integration of older divinatory practices (astrology, tarot, and I Ching) with standard psychological counselling,”⁷⁶ which also aptly describes the occult knowledge transmitted in the *Avestan Schools of Astrology*. Also, supposedly “Avestan” symbols of planets, Zodiac signs, and Zervan signs, actively recommended to all students of Avestan schools of astrology for casting various horoscopes or making magical talismans, are nothing but innovations within the local New Age movement.

A Question of Authority in a New Age Zoroastrian Community

Initially, the first Zoroastrian community in St Petersburg construed itself as a religious organization with a charismatic, almost autocratic leader at the helm. For this purpose, the members have chosen a structure of the “traditionalist” and “revivalist” (or represented as such) community, emphasizing the unique position of Globa in the Russian Zoroastrian doctrine and his authority as the only “spiritual” and “senior” leader of the community.⁷⁷ At the same time, Russian Orthodox Christian and *New Age* connotations can be traced in the designation of hierarchy and spheres of activity in the official statute of the community. It was open not only to students of astrological courses but also to other seekers, sympathizers with the Zoroastrian religion, and random guests. It remains so to this day and is often a meeting place for passing Parsi visitors or young Iranians studying Russian in St Petersburg.⁷⁸

The idea of autocratic leadership which is understood as “traditional Zoroastrian” leadership, could never be realized. The reasons were various: Globa’s permanent absence from the city (he has lived in many places and many countries, but most of his life in Moscow), his alleged disinterest in practical leadership as well as his ongoing pursuit of his core business of traveling and giving astrological lectures for *Avestan Schools of Astrology* throughout the entire post-Soviet space, holding talks via mass media, casting horoscopes, and writing books.

The performance of collective liturgies described above, the teaching of common prayers and rituals, and the organization of Zoroastrian festivals according to the specific Astro-Zoroastrian calendar developed by Globa and his students rested on the shoulders of the *khorbads*, second-rank clergy within the Zoroastrian community initiated by Globa. In the mid-1990s, there were about a dozen of them. As the community began to hold frequent (at the beginning, twice weekly) ritual gatherings (“divine services”), Globa blessed one *khorbad* for the primary role onsite as a “junior leader,” who served until 2015.

Although the community had been autonomous for many years

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See, for instance, P. P. Globa’s interview *About Nowruz and Beyond*, to the TV company “Mir.” *Globastra*, March 18, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyteHDZOpQA>.

75

Pavel Globa: Forecast—The Hague, Xi Jinping; M. Reger, I. Shishkin, March 23, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=haqv_cLwEZ8.

76

Melton, “New Age movement.”

77

Stausberg and Tessmann, “The Appropriation of a Religion,” 452.

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Zasiad’ko, “What Does It Mean to Be a ‘Russian Zoroastrian’?,” 61.

and its leader Globa had ceased to visit it in the early 2000s, the lay people and the rest of the *khorbads* tried to maintain this link by coming to Moscow for advice for various reasons, as they did not consider themselves entitled to make certain decisions (for instance, conceptualizing a new issue of the magazine *Mitra*) without Globa's permission. Since the late 2000s, the reference to *Zervanism* as a name for a particular type of Zoroastrianism has faded. This was probably due to the gradual growth of the community's autonomy, as external contacts with Iranians and Indians through travel and guest visits strengthened the community members' identity as Zoroastrians. After a conflict between the community members in 2019, which can be described as somewhat generational, one part of the community obtained a new official registration in 2022 as the "Zoroastrians of St Petersburg," where neither *Zervano-Zoroastrianism* nor Globa were mentioned as spiritual authorities.⁷⁹ The latest statute stated that the new community should be regulated by the General Meeting of the members and the Council (5.1). In contrast, the belief of the community is based on "Avesta-teaching," which includes "Avesta, Gathas, and Avestan astrology" (1.3). Over time, the idea of authority in the community has evolved from the absolute rule of the spiritual leader to the co-governance of several *khorbads* and finally to the virtual disappearance of the governing body. This unstable dynamic differs from Zoroastrian ethnic communities, where hierarchical relationships are clearly expressed and maintained, and is certainly like other contemporary New Age communities, such as *Anastasians* and Neopagans.

Concluding Remarks

The reflexive view of Russian Zoroastrianism implies that, despite common elements and possible overlaps in doctrines and ritual practices, the narrative of the believers and its vernacular character are determined by the historical and cultural contextual uniqueness of the religion in which they are involved. As previously mentioned, in the view of many scholars of Zoroastrianism, any contemporary form of self-ascription to "Zoroastrian religion" had to inevitably acquire validation as a subject for academic research. *Living* religions, even modern Parsi Zoroastrianism, may also contain mystical or occult elements or strands of esoteric discourses—created, borrowed, or (re) interpreted—that must be distinguished in each case and specific context. However, such a contextual understanding does not allow accurate and valuable conclusions to be drawn about other "varieties" of Zoroastrianism by analogy because of differences in social and cultural conditions. It is therefore worth asking how necessary it is to have a field of research such as Zoroastrian esotericism, where there are not many exponents of para-traditions, as opposed to, for example, the broad field of Islamic esotericism (at least large complexes of Shī'ī and Ismā'īlie esotericism, Sufism, and Traditionalist Islamic esotericism).⁸⁰ What would be the practical use of such a field for studying religions? While the study and description of different types/discourses of esotericism—depending on the definition—can still be understood as a research program, what about comparison? I thus believe the only way out for researchers is to describe in detail what they observe or

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Zasiad'ko, "What Does It Mean to Be a 'Russian Zoroastrian'?", 53.

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Liana Saif, "What Is Islamic Esotericism?" *Correspondences* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1–59.

what other studies ignore, namely the dynamics of esoteric, occult, or *New Age* elements and discourses and their correlation with others that believers consider to be (appropriated) “traditional” components, as described in the example of the St Petersburg Zoroastrian community.

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of this essay, it is worth noting that the local believers’ categories (including the esoteric) vary. They also are unstable and can be replaced by others or by further analogies gained through conversations with fellow Zoroastrians and New Age seekers, through studying various kinds of literature, or through acquiring specialized knowledge from the Internet. The range of the sources is wide and probably inexhaustible: from special religious instructions in the spirit of Parsi traditionalism to esoteric instructions. Nor should we exclude non-religious discourses, such as political or economic discourses, with their vocabularies and practices, which significantly impact the lives and identities of community members. Can we provide a clear answer to the question as to what extent the use of occult or divination practices, such as casting horoscopes, can make the religion of the Russian Zoroastrians completely esoteric, or can consider it to be so? Can we determine whether it contains a specifically *Zoroastrian* type of esotericism? Instead, we do not. Since *Avestan astrology*, theosophy, neopagan, and other elements and discourses cover only part of the needs of the individuals and the community, they are still complementary to their religious pursuits. Thus, esoteric ideas or practices are not incorporated into liturgies and daily prayer rites, for which other authorities, texts, and *YouTube* videos of Iranian and Persian Zoroastrian priests are used. We can only state that if Russian Zoroastrianism is supposed to represent a kind of “para-tradition,” then such a para-tradition is hardly comparable in its relationship to the source of inspiration, i.e., ethnic Zoroastrianism and, to a greater extent, possesses the characteristics of its cultural and religious environment.

Based on careful linguistic study, we observe hermeneutic polyphony in analyzing heterogeneous beliefs and their fragments, even at the level of texts. The Avestan and Middle Persian Zoroastrian scriptures—which may trace quite different “versions” of Zoroastrianism, depending on time and place—contain some elements that we might interpret as popular divination practices or magical formulae. In the living tradition, they can undoubtedly be regarded as no less essential components of the Zoroastrian religion(s), despite the fact that they contradict the basic provisions of the “Zoroastrian ethos” so consciously reconstrued by scholars of past generations.⁸¹ Considering Zoroastrian texts and practices within the framework of *New Age* spirituality, which can be presented as “a set of tools from which each individual New Ager can select and combine elements ad lib,”⁸² we can see that only individual experience, *living religion*, is determinative. It is this, and not necessarily the mechanism of community control (which is minimal in the case of the St Petersburg Zoroastrians), that is decisive in interpreting the scriptures and creating one’s own idea of the “ancient hidden knowledge” and its practices. Most likely, after thirty years, we can still observe in Russian Zoroastrianism the co-existence of various fluctuations and trends in ideas and rituals, and at the level of the institution, which are far from complete.

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Antonio Panaino, “Magic I. Magical Elements in the Avesta and Nērang Literature,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, July 20, 2008, accessed August 10, 2024, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/magic-i-magical-elements-in-the-avesta-and-nerang-literature>.

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Olav Hammer, “New Age Movement,” 860.