

**“OCCULTURE”
AND ALTERNATIVE FORMS
OF RELIGIOSITY
IN CONTEMPORARY AZERBAIJAN**

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Research and Analyses – No. 39 – March 2017

URL : http://religion.info/pdf/2017_03_alternative_religiosity_Azerbaijan.pdf

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Abstract

Analysing the current phenomena of alternative religiosities through a post-Soviet lens may be productive in the Azerbaijani context, given the so-called “religious revival” experienced by the countries of the former Soviet Union. However, these clusters of beliefs and practices do not cohere into a widely accepted system, therefore it is difficult to analyse them within the general framework of the theory of religion. Yet they should not be regarded as being irrelevant to religiosity, in that they reflect a relationship to supernatural and transcendental forces that is articulated in everyday life. In practice, the development of alternative religious practices in Azerbaijan should be interpreted in a context characterised by the existence of bridges between traditional practices and new forms of religion-related activities, and the importance of the circulation of knowledge and people from Soviet Russia before 1991 and currently within a space stretching from Russia to Turkey, against the background of the increased supply of and demand for alternative services related to “the curing of body and soul”, together with a growing individualisation of religious practices. This article focuses on three specific groups/areas in Azerbaijan: *ekstrasensy* and parapsychologists, popular “occulture”, and the Hare Krishna community.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, alternative religiosities, occulture, parapsychology, psychics, *ekstrasensy*

Introduction¹

An extremely popular TV programme in the post-Soviet space in the last ten years has been “*The Clash of Ekstrasensy*” (*Bitva ekstrasensov* in Russian), modelled on the British reality show *The Psychic Challenge*. In the show, a range of people engaged in so-called extrasensory activities are assigned various challenges and compete with one another. The Russian version has gained the most attention; however, local variants can also be found, including in Azerbaijan.² Being a finalist – or even just a participant – in the show has become a major commercial boon for some *ekstrasensy* in Azerbaijan (and

¹ Research for this publication was made possible through financial support from the French National Research Agency (Agence Nationale de la Recherche) within the programme “New Religiosities in Turkey: Reenchantment in a Secularized Muslim Country?” (ANR-13-FRAL-0006, acronym NEORELIGITUR).

² The Russian version of the programme was first accessible via cable and satellite, then a local version started being broadcast on Azerbaijani Space TV under the name *Ekstrahiss*, translated into Azerbaijani from the Russian.

elsewhere).³ The concept of *ekstrasensy* refers to a wide spectrum of activities that may range from fortune telling, astrology, clairvoyance or divination to parapsychology, magic, healing, shamanic powers, para-sciences or traditional medicine. For all the “bizarre”, “funny”, or “scary” character these activities may take on for outsiders, they are not the result of the mere offering of services by charlatans. They also have their public, and in some sense meet a demand for spiritual services.

These clusters of beliefs and practices lack the strong structures and authorities of traditional religious organisations, since they neither rely on a community of believers nor cohere into a widely accepted system. Thus, it is difficult to analyse them within the general framework of the theory of religion. Yet they should not be regarded as being irrelevant to religiosity (in terms of faith experienced on a daily basis) in that they reflect a relationship to supernatural and transcendental forces that is articulated in everyday life, but outside the usual realm of the sacred. Instead, what seems to best describe them is the term “occulture”, as Partridge uses it to describe the contemporary alternative religious milieu in the West.⁴ This approach allows for greater flexibility in analysing contemporary nebulous forms of spirituality, not least in the post-Soviet space, where their development went hand in hand with democratisation and secularisation, with the latter term being used in the sense of faith becoming an individual/private matter. For Roy (2008: 21; 279), secularisation and religious revival are closely linked, because the former is a direct consequence of the latter and appears as a consequence of globalisation, or rather entry into globalisation from a post-Soviet perspective.

³ *Ekstrasensy* (the plural of *ekstrasens*) are not the same as the “psychics” known in the West due to the supposedly different principles of their work (Belyaev, 2012: 262). Basically, they practice bio-field healing. In order to retain the difference in the text, I will retain the Russian terms *ekstrasens/ekstrasensy* – a popular notion that subsumes both extrasensory powers (senses beyond the realm of science) and extrasensory activities (which enable practitioners to act on the environment and other people by means of “unusual powers”) (V.I. Kharitonova, cited in Lindquist, 2006: 52).

⁴ Partridge defines occulture as “a vast spectrum of beliefs and practices sourced by Eastern spirituality, paganism, spiritualism, theosophy, alternative sciences and medicine, popular psychology, and a wide range of beliefs awakening out of general interest in the paranormal, huge variety of speculations, a good deal of it directly contradictory” (2004: 4; see also pp. 63–64).

If Azerbaijani society is wavering between different influences, it also experiences its own dynamics that should not be underestimated. As a result, even in Soviet times, long-established ties with Russian occult circles allowed for the circulation of knowledge that intermingled with local Azerbaijani elements. At the same time, the country currently follows global trends in terms of the increased offer of and demand for services related to “the curing of body and soul”, against the background of a growing individualisation of religious practices.

This article therefore aims to provide an overview of some alternative forms of religiosity in Azerbaijan. While attempting to identify various milieus, we will see that they often overlap, and that any attempt to lay down clear boundaries between people and practices is inappropriate. Indeed, a common feature among new forms of religiosity, religions and sects is their blurred frontiers (Roy, 2008: 37). The article focuses on three specific groups and areas, namely *ekstrasensy* and parapsychologists, popular “occulture”, and the Hare Krishna community (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, or ISKCON).⁵ It will contend that, regardless of the superficial qualities or strong commitment of the people concerned, the social significance of these practices in Azerbaijan goes well beyond the simple numerical presence of the followers of such practices in the country. As such, these practices need to be taken into account and understood.

When Soviet occulture meets local peculiarities, and vice versa

The emergence or strengthening of new forms of religiosity is often associated with periods of anxiety and chaos. Basically, what is labelled occultism, esotericism, or alternative or heterodox religiosity is primarily a way of coping with life for a population that is searching for meaning (Belyaev, 2012: 259). Of the people I met during my fieldwork, many of their biographies intersected with the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a result, not only had the

⁵ If we draw on recent literature, of the three categories discussed in this article, only ISKCON qualifies as a New Religious Movement (Bromley, 2012: 16). Even if it is a structured movement and its followers tend to use a more dogmatic discourse than the followers of non-structured networks of alternative religiosity, ISKCON is evolving in interaction with the occult nebula (Mayer, 1993: 51).

lives they had been living so far changed dramatically, but also the whole economic, social, and mental framework that they had been accustomed to disappeared overnight, leading to a general “degradation” (*degradatsija* in Russian), as people in the former Soviet Union often describe it. Of course, this should not be seen as the sole explanation for the phenomena described in this article. Yet it is undoubtedly a crucial factor, together with the space left empty by the rapid rejection of Marxist doctrines and the lack of “rational channels of agency” that still characterises several post-Soviet countries ruled by authoritarian political regimes and experiencing insecurity in the most vital sectors of everyday life (Lindquist, 2006: 2, 9).

Despite the official policy of atheism, and notwithstanding harsh anti-religious campaigns, religion as a system of belief had not disappeared during Soviet times, nor had popular beliefs and habits. This is true throughout the countries of the former Soviet Union, and impacts post-socialist spiritualism in various ways. In Azerbaijan, it is reflected in the persistence of local practices that are still strongly associated with autochthonous forms of religiosity and spirituality, often in relation to healing practices. Although they do not form the core of this paper, these practices need to be mentioned, since most of the people who offer alternative spiritual services directly source their practices and knowledge from this heritage.

For example, a common feature of the Eurasian space is the importance of shrines, whatever the religion concerned. In the socialist world these places of worship (entire complexes, a grave, or simply a tree or some stones) had an additional peculiarity: they were the last places of worship after other religious buildings had been destroyed (Grant, 2011: 654). In Azerbaijan, they are randomly called *pir*,⁶ *ziyaretgah*,⁷ or, in the villages, *ojak*. Individual or collective visits to these places of worship are part and parcel of Azerbaijani social life (Darieva, 2016: 207). An interesting point is that, according to proponents of an orthodox version of Islam, they are mere charlatan practices (Darieva, 2016:

⁶ Which refers to a saintly person or, by association, to the place where he/she is buried.

⁷ From *ziyaret* meaning “visit”.

208; Obadia, 2013: 161), just like the alternative religious practices analysed in this article.

But nonetheless, *pirs* still have a very strong practical and symbolic meaning in Azerbaijan. This certainly explains why some practitioners (e.g. an informant who is a parapsychologist – see next section) claim a form of linkage to these places and people. Traditional healers are also still very popular in Azerbaijan, both in urban and rural areas, even if the latter tend to have more of such healers. Two figures emerge in the Azerbaijani context, namely the *çöpçü*⁸ (plural *çöpler*) and *çıldaqcı*.⁹ A *çöpçü* is a person, usually a woman, who helps young children expel small particles (plural *çöpler*) caught in their throats. A *çıldaqcı* is a person who helps people get rid of their fears. A typical healing session would have the healer take a cotton or a mere rag, put it on fire, and then wrap a needle with it to touch precise nerve points on the body to rid the patient/client of their fear. The forces responsible for the fear would then leave the body. This is a basic magical method that works on the principle of fighting harm with harm (Bünyadov et al., 2007: 323). Both the *çöpçü* and *çıldaqcı* are strongly associated with Baku and the Absheron Peninsula around it, although they are also to be found in other Azerbaijani regions. As we shall see below, parapsychologists in Baku often claim a familial or symbolic parentage linking them with these traditional healers, while several informants referred to such healers as a rural and popular version of psychologists.

The maintenance of these folk practices, combined with some remnants of established religions, occultism, and indigenous religions, paved the way for the opening up of alternative religious spaces in the post-Soviet period (Shterin, 2012: 287). In addition, Soviet modernisation and state atheism paradoxically created conditions for the emergence of new forms of religiosity. Especially from the 1960s, the Khrushchev “thaw” enabled the development of a wide range of activities – some of which were promoted by the authorities – that would be considered to belong to the realm of “occulture” in the West. Moscow, Leningrad – and, more broadly, Russia – played a major role as the centres for these

⁸ Pronounced “chepchu”.

⁹ Pronounced “childarji”.

activities, and to a large extent this is still the case today. The late 1960s and 1970s were even a period of expansion, sometimes supported by the state itself, with the humanities leaning towards alignment with “hard sciences”. Even the KGB played a major part in these developments. While charismatic individuals, circles and sects emerged in Moscow, Leningrad, and other cities of Soviet Russia, the academic system was given the means to develop disciplines and conduct experiments that would simply have been dismissed in the West (Menzel, 2012: 151). But this was not public and remained limited to small circles. Topics such as UFOs, yoga, and parapsychology were discussed in journals and magazines throughout the Soviet period, but only after 1988 did they start to be debated without the scorn and prejudice they were treated with previously (Belyaev, 2012: 259). For its part, political liberalisation in the 1980s led to an exponential increase in the number of healers (*tseleli* in Russian), magicians (*magi*) and astrologers (*gadal'shiki*) (Belyaev, 2012: 260). Television played a major role in popularising esoteric knowledge and skills; for instance, the Ukrainian psychologist, hypnotherapist and medical doctor Anatoli Kashpirovskiy gained country-wide fame with his hypnosis sessions: during “healing sessions” he would hypnotise whole stadiums of people (Lindquist, 2006: 35–36).

Several academic institutes were at the forefront of the transmission of academic knowledge, such as the institutes for the study of eastern religions and philosophy at the Moscow and Leningrad universities, as well as the departments of Indology and Egyptology at the latter, and the Institute of Asian and African Countries at the former (Menzel, 2012: 155). Psychology and psychoanalysis as “hotbeds of heterodox belief systems” (Menzel, 2012: 160) were often a professional entry route for new practitioners and believers. During my fieldwork in Baku I came across a psychologist who had studied in the Department of Philosophy at Leningrad University who recounted how with her university friends she was given lectures on psychology or parapsychology and related disciplines. She now works at the Ministry of Sports of the Republic of Azerbaijan as a psychologist (or “coach”) for athletes after working for some years in Istanbul in a centre for bio-energy¹⁰ and parapsychology that she had

¹⁰ Basically, “bio-energy” (*bioenergetika* in Russian) deals with the rebalancing of people’s energy.

opened with her sister, who was herself a specialist in bio-energy now living in the United States. Similarly, a member of the Hare Krishna community since 1991 described the long and demanding training she imposed on herself: a graduate of the Institute of Psychology at Lomonosov University in Moscow, she undertook the study of the three monotheisms and the Kabbalah, “[propagating] the Torah among the Jews of Krasnaya Sloboda”,¹¹ with various “specialists” (e.g. from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and India) in astrology. Finally, she started her work as an *ekstrasens* and parapsychologist. In a way that was typical of such practitioners, she insisted that, unlike a physician, she had to know all these sciences in order to be able to “cure souls”. She had heard of the Hare Krishna movement from a TV advertisement she saw while watching one of Kashpirovskiy’s healing sessions (see above).

A logical consequence of this state of affairs in both Russia and Azerbaijan is the considerable degree of porosity between the esoteric and academic milieus. This is partly due to the Soviet heritage, as was indicated earlier, since what is perceived as a pseudo-science in the West was actually taught and studied as a science in the former Soviet Union. This is also linked to the importance of the elite in the transmission of esoteric and heterodox knowledge in both Russia (Menzel, 2012: 184) and Azerbaijan. This explains the presence of university professors, academics and researchers at seminars on personal development, e.g. the healer Boris Zolotov, who was a member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, or Vyacheslav Bronnikov in the late 1990s, whose patients had been examined at the Institute for Brain Research in St Petersburg, which is part of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Belyaev, 2012: 263–64). In newspapers advertising healing or astrological services in Azerbaijan, some advertisements referred to a practitioner working as a “sociologist at the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan” (this institution still exists as such).

Whether such claims are true or not, they may have a dual significance: some people fail to make an adequate living despite their high levels of education in a country where the salaries of specialists in the social sciences are

¹¹ A village in the Guba area (northern Azerbaijan) populated mainly by mountain Jews.

miserable and their subjects of research (sociology, anthropology, ethnography, etc.) are regarded as irrelevant; while, at the same time, presenting oneself as a member of the Academy of Sciences might seem prestigious to potential clients and therefore constitutes a potential advantage in the marketing of one's know-how. Consequently, magic, as a part of the service sector, also offers alternative sources of income for people who were severely hit by the post-socialist changes, which is certainly the case for academics (Lindquist, 2006: 23). Moreover, in Azerbaijan, as in Russia, “what intensified significantly after the collapse of the Soviet Union was not the interest in esoteric knowledge as such, but merely the scope of this interest and the intense communication of this knowledge to broad groups of the general population” (Belyaev, 2012: 266), as we shall see in the next section.

Ekstrasensy and parapsychologists

TV programmes like *The Clash of Ekstrasensy* have been a way of popularising on a larger scale activities and beliefs that were not very familiar to the post-Soviet masses, but rather confined for the most part to elite circles. Participating in such competitions has become a marketing strategy and an advertising channel for some *ekstrasensy*. It is also a means of disseminating and trivialising interventions that may appear as unusual or “bizarre” to part of the population. The subsequent success of several Azerbaijanis or Bakuviens¹² was based on their participation in such programmes, e.g. Khayal Alekperov, who first won a similar contest in Azerbaijan and was then invited to participate in the first Ukrainian version, the final of which he won in 2012. Ziraddin Rzayev, who was one of the finalists of the sixth season (2009), now lives and works as an *ekstrasens* in Moscow.

But possibly the best example of an excellent return on investment on a family level after appearing on the show is Galina Baghirova, who was a finalist in the eighth season (2010) of the Russian version. A “clairvoyant, cosmoenergetic, *ekstrasens*, medium, TV moderator and author of the book *The*

¹² Inhabitants of Baku.

Power of Ekstrasensy”,¹³ she was born in Baku in 1958 and is of Azeri and Tatar descent. Her biography also indicates some Persian roots. She draws her extrasensory inheritance from her maternal grandmother, who was a well-known magician, and her paternal grandfather, who was a clairvoyant (*yasnovidyashiy* in Russian). She first graduated from Baku State University and worked as an actress, then she married and subsequently gave birth to two children (a boy and girl), but, as she claims to have predicted, she became a widow after her husband’s death a few years later. At that time she claims to have seen in a dream a Bulgarian clairvoyant who was very well known in the post-Soviet space, Vanga, holding in her hands some pieces of sugar, which form Baghirova’s preferred symbol. Vanga, she says, predicted that some changes would occur in her life that would lead to her helping other people.¹⁴ This is basically how she started her work. In 1988 Baghirova started advertising in newspapers; below is a complete advertisement published in the advertising newspaper *Birzha*:¹⁵

Clairvoyant-parapsychologist Galina Baghirova will really help you: prognosis on fate (past, present, past), elimination of black influences, provision of success in all spheres of life, business prognosis, answers to any questions related to daily issues, and everything about the person you are interested in. Search for missing persons,¹⁶ she will help you to see flats and offices. She works on pictures and all crystal sugars. She will show you how not to make mistakes. If you are searching for someone, she will tell you where to find him/her.

¹³ <<http://galina-Baghirova.ru/experts.php>>, accessed 29 February 2016. Her personal page also used to present her as a parapsychologist: the term is now part of her centre’s name (Moscow Centre of Parapsychology and Hypnosis). Baghirova’s website has been updated several times, not least because, as is stated on the first page, the website had been attacked several times by fraudsters who tried to use her name to make money.

¹⁴ <<http://galina-Baghirova.ru/>>, accessed 29 February 2016.

¹⁵ *Birja* (stock exchange) was first published in 1990 and contains a wide range of advertisements to buy/sell goods and services in a number of sectors (housing, cars, various objects, nursing, medical services, etc.). These advertisements appear predominantly in Russian.

¹⁶ Missing persons are a recurring issue in the former Soviet Union, especially in Russia: due to the huge distances over which the country is spread, it is a fairly frequent occurrence for people to disappear overnight. One of the challenges of *The Clash of Ekstrasensy* was that of finding missing persons. Even the police would sometimes resort to using an *ekstrasens*.

Baghirova continued to place advertisements in this newspaper until the mid-2000s, after which they stopped. She eventually established the Centre of Parapsychology and the Six Senses of *Ekstrasensory Perception* (*Tsentr parapsikhologiy i sverkhchuvstvennogovospriatija 6 chuvstv* in Russian) in Moscow, based on the principle that “God gave us five organic senses, but there is an additional one, which



Galina Baghirova.

helps see and hear what can't be seen and heard by others” (the so-called “third eye”). The centre has been renamed the Moscow Centre of Parapsychology and Hypnosis. Baghirova and her son Isa offer training at the centre (“All magic in one month: parapsychology, clairvoyance, development of extrasensory faculties, trance methods, etc.”), as well as online training. She also provides services to clients at the centre that deal with a variety of issues (money and business; personal, psychological and medical problems; exams; children's sleeping problems; phobias; curses; witchcraft; etc.), and uses various methods to deal with them, including “ancient methods with fire and special herbs, seeds and aromas”.¹⁷ Feng shui is also used to deal with housing issues. The centre is a family enterprise since her son, Isa Baghirov, a self-proclaimed “parapsychologist and mentalist”,¹⁸ is also a member of the “specialists team”. Her daughter Leyla, once a specialist who “masters the secret of ancient Persian gypsy clairvoyance”,¹⁹ seems to have given up these activities in 2015.

Although they do not live and work in Azerbaijan, Baghirova and her son are fairly well known in Baku, especially among Russian-speaking circles. They

¹⁷ <http://galina-Baghirova.ru/lichniy_priyom_msk.php>, accessed 29 February 2016.

¹⁸ <<http://isa-Baghirov.ru/obo-mne>>, accessed 29 February 2016.

¹⁹ According to the information on her mother's website before it was updated.

are regularly interviewed by newspapers, notably the main Russian-language online newspaper *Ekho*. In the edition of 5 March 2016, Baghirova predicted, among other things, a possible third devaluation of the manat (Azerbaijan's national currency).²⁰ In an interview with the same newspaper in 2014,²¹ her son was asked why thus far the “science of feng shui” was not very popular in Azerbaijan. Isa gave the following answer: “Our people [Azerbaijanis] have another world vision, other activities and goals. They prefer daily banality and rarely occupy themselves with spiritual development.” Various practitioners presented the same argument to me on several occasions. However, one of the main reasons for this lack of interest might be much more trivial: offering parapsychology, feng shui, and related services has better financial prospects in Moscow than in Baku, not least because the market is much more promising in the Russian capital.



The office of parapsychologist Shahseddin Imanli (from his website).

²⁰ <<http://www.echo.az/article.php?aid=97455>>, accessed 10 March 2016.

²¹ <<http://www.echo.az/article.php?aid=59766>>, accessed 10 March 2016.

For all their popular success – or, rather, *because of* it – *ekstrasensy* do not find favour in the eyes of those who present themselves solely as “parapsychologists”. In the Soviet Union, especially after the Khrushchev period, parapsychology, medicine, and physics mingled and opened up new fields of research (Menzel, 2012: 152). A renowned figure of Soviet parapsychology in the 1960s and 1970s was the *ekstrasens* and healer Evgeniya Davitashvili, better known as Dzhuna. Born in the southern Russian region of Krasnodar, she left there in the early 1980s for Moscow, or, according to



Dzhuna Davitashvili.

another version, she was sent to Tbilisi to work as a nurse, where she met her future Georgian husband. Dzhuna was well known in the former Soviet Union because she was Leonid Brezhnev’s personal healer – a fact that became public knowledge.²² Dzhuna, who since 1980 has been living in Moscow, where she carried out experiments in special clinics, is still an authority in her area of expertise in the countries of the former Soviet Union. For example, a number of people advertising their extrasensory and healing powers in *Birzha* claim to be followers of her methods. Soviet parapsychology was not unknown in the West after US parapsychologists Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder attended the first Soviet Congress of Parapsychology in 1968 and published a book about their experiences in 1970, *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* (Menzel, 2012: 180).

Despite presenting themselves as the “real” scientists in charge of this “precise science”, as one of them told me, the parapsychologists I met in Baku

²² She was not the only healer involved in treating ageing senior leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Lindquist, 2006: 34).

are desperately seeking legitimisation. As a result, they usually resort to several stratagems to confirm the merits of their work. Unfortunately, some of these stratagems are the same as those used by their competitors in the *ekstrasens* arena. One such stratagem is to trace a charismatic provenance and to proclaim themselves the heirs of a family and/or historical continuity. For example, one of them (informant 1) touched on some links in his native region (Nakhichevan) with the Sumerians and some tribes who came from Iraq to Nakhichevan.²³ Another one (informant 2) explained that his region is home to St George's tomb (*Cercis türbesi*), whose construction, he contended, was initiated by his grandfather when he became the secretary of the local section of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan. The monument, he recalled, was finally built only in 1989. He also emphasised his alleged descent from the Seyyeds, i.e. the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. Both informants referred to a grandfather, a grandmother, and/or an aunt who was endowed with healing powers, was an expert in herbs or able to read the bones, a *çöpçü*, or a *çıldaqcı*. They did not dismiss these popular practices, which, they say, are a “branch” of parapsychology. This might be a way of embedding their roles in a traditional framework that seems more acceptable and within the understanding of a wider public.

These parapsychologists can be regarded as fairly marginal in Azerbaijani society more widely, and in the “curing of body and soul” market especially. The way in which I contacted them is fairly telling. Informant 1 was advertising his services in the newspaper *Birzha* in the “medical services” section. He said that he was enthusiastic about my research topic, agreeing to a recorded interview that lasted almost three hours, which he seemed to perceive as a unique opportunity for him to disseminate his knowledge. I reached informant 2 through a simple search on the Internet. This parapsychologist was actually working in Baku at the Institute for Invention and Business, which offers a very wide range of courses ranging from how to repair a mobile phone or a computer to hairdressing, manicure and accountancy. Although he claimed to have many students from Azerbaijan, Russia, and occasionally Turkey or even China, he

²³ It is possible that my informant hinted at his descent from some Turkmen tribes, but this was not clear by the end of the interview.

apparently experienced great difficulty in recruiting enough people to form a new group of students, and I never managed to meet any of them. Both informants obviously suffered from a lack of scientific recognition – even any recognition at all – since the medical circles they identify themselves with do not recognise them as equals; at the same time, they have a poor opinion of notorious people like Galina Baghirova or *The Clash of Ekstrasensy* participants in general, who, according to them, are engaged in unimportant matters, but are much more attractive to a wider audience:

I learnt both traditional and non-traditional medicine, although professors and academicians don't want to accept me. I used to approach TV channels, but I haven't been doing that for three years now because they don't want to hear. Even people like psychologists [and] psychiatrics don't; they think parapsychologists are liars. Well, [the fact] that simple people don't understand is one thing, but when psychiatrists don't understand what parapsychology is In addition, if we look at the roots of psychology and psychiatry, it all comes from parapsychology. The roots are in parapsychology. ... As for TV programmes like *The Clash*, well, I think you should not show your divine abilities [on such programmes], because this would be a sin, or actually not a sin, but a mistake. ... Then you should not speak about the future like "this or that will happen to you" like Djuna [Davitashvili] or Vanga, or other *ekstrasensy* (informant 1, December 2014).

Parapsychology is a far-reaching science; you must know a lot of things in a lot of areas. I work on my own because I don't trust the others. They may know a branch, but not the others. There is psychotherapy, biotherapy [counts on his hands]. ... But it is not recognised as a science, although this is the science of the 21st century! It is not a minor task! (informant 2, April 2015).

While they insist on the scientific nature of their approach, their answers were full of religious references, which at first sight might appear to be fairly contradictory:

People know well what we are dealing with; for me, I'm dealing with a science that is necessary to everybody: I'm not meddling in religion and politics. Science will not replace other domains. ... Some people use parapsychology in breach of the laws of religion; I'm just observing [them]. The law of God is humanity's

greatest programme. If you follow it, then it becomes an enormous cosmic programme²⁴ (informant 2).²⁵

You see, the problem is that sometimes parapsychology overlaps with religion. ... Wherever I live, wherever I look, I see Allah. ... All rivers do flow to the ocean;²⁶ it doesn't matter: the most important [thing] is to recognise the Very High. ... Sometimes people ask what my religion is and I say that I *work* on religion because religion is a cosmic conscience. ... This is all about abstract healing. But our people [*nashi* = Azerbaijanis] are not ready for that yet The fact is that we are in a Muslim country; it is not developed that much yet. ... In addition, if we look at the roots of psychology and psychiatry, it all comes from parapsychology. The roots are in parapsychology.

Interviewer: Then it's not vice versa?

No. ... The level of recognition of parapsychology is very weak. Even psychologists do not believe in God, whereas psychology is the science of the soul! This is the reason why parapsychology may be done only under the aegis of God. We should rely on Him. We should rely on Him wherever we look. This is the goal of true parapsychology (informant 1).

These comments need to be interpreted on several levels. Firstly, parapsychologists tend to adopt both a syncretic and holistic approach in a way that undoubtedly recalls the New Age methods and alternative therapies in the West. They mix a variety of references originating in science, religion, mythology, the cure of the body and soul, and so on. Also, broadly speaking, they do not treat an isolated disease, but the whole person from various perspectives (mental, physical, emotional, spiritual) in relation to his/her environment (Hanegraaf, 1997: 43). Secondly, their practices (just like those of *ekstrasensy* and other similar practitioners) rely on the “natural affinity” between healing and religion (Hanegraaf, 1997: 44) in that both are meant to deal with human weakness and suffering. Thirdly, the constant reference to

²⁴ My interviewee was answering one of my questions related to the death of Etibar Mammedaliyev, a parapsychologist and founder of the Union of Parapsychologists of Azerbaijan, who was murdered in 1999, along with his two sons. While the murder was allegedly committed by the so-called Army of Islam (in all likelihood a criminal group), the reasons for it have never been revealed.

²⁵ Informant 1 mentioned arguments he had with the staff of a newspaper for which he was writing: they had accused him of being an “unbeliever” (*kafir*).

²⁶ Natural analogies are very widespread in the cultic milieu.

religion may also be interpreted from several perspectives. While these practitioners do not see any discrepancy between their practices and religion, to some extent this stance may be identified as a discursive strategy meant to attract (or, at least, not to discourage) potential clients whose religious values are perceived by these practitioners – or truly are – as possibly contradicting the approach promoted by parapsychology. One could argue that the cure of body and soul addresses everybody, not only believers, but the fact is that parapsychologists are offering their services first and foremost on the spiritual market, not on the political market.²⁷ Therefore, they need to make their activities attractive both to convinced believers and to people at different stages of a spiritual quest.

Informant 1 clearly linked his difficulties in developing his practice in Azerbaijan with what he sees as the lack of openness of Muslim Azerbaijani society. While this argument might be perceived as a way of explaining one's inability to appeal to clients, other practitioners, like Isa Baghirov, also use it. In addition, presenting parapsychology as an elite activity that is beyond the grasp of ordinary people tends to have a contradictory effect, since its whys and wherefores remain beyond the comprehension of the vast majority of people. Instead, most parapsychologists are inclined to dismiss popular esoteric culture, while, to their great displeasure, some people advertising divination services refer to parapsychology together with other practices like astrology, divination or folk-healing.

Popular “occulture”

Ekstrasens offers services in order to be rid of the Evil Eye, damage, rumours, etc. Correction of biological poles. (1995)

We offer the services of an *ekstrasens*. Cure of headaches, tension, eye illnesses, digestive system, rheumatism, kidney troubles, post-surgery aches, nervous illnesses, improvement of memory capacities, cure of under- or overweight, sugar diabetes, etc. (1995)

²⁷ And even this assertion is questionable since, as mentioned earlier, some politicians are known to use the services of *ekstrasensy*, as do the police and KGB. This has become the focus of a specific literature, e.g. Greyg (2012).

According to Djuna Davitachvili's "help yourself" method, a student of DD offers training courses in care [*lechenie*] and self-care. In the course of the training the opening of hands and of the third eye occurs. I make predictions for the future, help heal wounds, witchcraft, Evil Eye; I correct the patient's bioenergetics. (1995)

White and black peasant magic in the old style Protect [you] from damage, Evil Eye ... protect business in a powerful way; relief from anxiety [*çildaqçı*], depression, tiredness; improvement of self-confidence. (1999)

Professional physician, parapsychologist, healer [*celitel*] makes a diagnosis and guarantees to cure all kinds of illnesses (including the most difficult to cure) by means of psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, acupuncture, massage, manual therapy, bioenergetics therapy. (2000, under "medical services")

Just one month! The head of the "parapsychology" section in the newspaper *Women's World*, Nurida Mamedova, will make a new year's divination and predictions for 2001. (2000)

Ekstrasensy parapsychologist from the School of Moscow, magician by descent, welcomes you to a seance of divination and predictions for the future. (2014)

Gift of clairvoyance. Magic of ancient Persians. Kabbalah. Strong energetics. ... Psychological consultations, psychosomatic medicine. Astrologist, tarot. (2014)

Clairvoyant Karina, participant in the Russian TV show *The Clash of Ekstrasensy*, really works miracles! (2014)²⁸

These advertisements published in the newspaper *Birzha* (which is exclusively dedicated to advertising) from 1995 to 2014 testify to the diversity of practices and activities associated with parapsychology and *ekstrasensy*. Until the early 2000s these advertisements were included in the "miscellaneous" and "services" sections, but then a section dealing with "divination" was introduced, in which they all appear nowadays. Reading these advertisements, one can easily understand why the parapsychologists I met feel cheated, since many practitioners describe themselves in the same advertisement as parapsychologists while also offering many other varied services usually related to divination, magic and traditional healing. That said, even if their advertisements find themselves in the "divination" section, healers tend to present their interventions in medical-scientific terms without emphasising the

²⁸ See also Lindquist (2006: 37–38) for Russian advertisements that typically mirror these.

use of rituals, while magicians and *ekstrasensy* tend to stress the rituals they use (see also Lindquist, 2006: 26). References to alterity and foreign magical practices (Lindquist, 2006: 39) – in one of the cases quoted above the Persians and Kabbalah, but it could equally be the gypsies or Egyptian magic – are extremely popular. Since “licensed parapsychologists” consider that they represent the real science, these competitors are a serious concern for them; all the more so because such competitors continually refer to the “scientific establishment” (Lindquist, 2006: 37). Advertising in the “medical services” section therefore represents a part of their legitimisation strategy, as can be seen from the advertisement placed by informant 1: “Parapsychologist, psychologist, healer by heritage. Consultation, diagnosis and healing of the soul and the body.” As he would tell me later, “For me, I am only in the ‘medical services’ section. The others, they do some divination, that kind of stuff, but I am engaged only in parapsychology. My job is to heal people in order for them to evolve.”

It is doubtful whether many people consult these advertisements since, as several people in Baku stated, “if they need to advertise, it means that they are not very good”. But at least the advertisements’ publication enables researchers to note that many different influences mingle in the realm of popular esoteric culture: Islam; superstition; folk medicine, including Russian folk medicine and traditional practices like *çöpçülük*; magic; and, last but not least, esoteric practices like the Kabbalah. In Azerbaijan, as elsewhere, the esoteric approach, its symbols and elements are often associated with traditional and folk practices, beliefs, and superstitions.

Basically, esotericism involves emphasising the universal nature of a precise symbol while looking for corresponding symbols in other traditions, in a process of revealing without popularising (Riffard, 1999: x–xii). It establishes correspondence between heaven and earth, human beings and the cosmos, and so forth. Much of contemporary popular esotericism pretends to make occult elements accessible to a vast number of people, and this is the main argument of practitioners. In effect, however, the term “esoteric” eventually came to have no precise meaning and became synonymous with “alternative religiosity” (Mayer, 1993: 50).

Magic and astrology appear as occult arts *par excellence* (Riffard, 1997: xii). Astrology is, of course, an important part of popular esoteric culture because it appears in all contexts and addresses universal topics (Morin et al., 1981: 89–90). In Russia, Pavel and Tamara Globa have popularised this practice on The Fifth Wheel (*Pyatoe koleso*), a St Petersburg TV channel. Pavel Globa had taught astrology underground since the 1970s, but was charged with anti-Soviet agitation and consequently imprisoned (Belyaev, 2012: 261). The Globas presented astrology as a form of ancient esoteric knowledge related to Zoroastrianism (Belyaev, 2012: 261). For astrologers in Azerbaijan, it is much easier to use Zoroastrianism as a reference since it was a state religion when the territory currently known as Azerbaijan was under Sassanid rule, before the Arab conquest in the middle of the seventh century. References to Zoroastrianism are therefore very widespread among Azerbaijani occult circles, and Zarathustra is an especially popular figure.²⁹ For example, the chief editor of the main (and sole) publication in Azerbaijan dedicated entirely to popular esoteric culture, *Qoroskop*, emphasised the essential character of Zoroastrian philosophy in his approach. Zoroastrianism, he explained, as the first source of astrology even before the Egyptians, can play a significant role in deciphering the modern world. Yet Zoroastrianism is definitely not the only subject of this fortnightly newspaper,³⁰ which – typically for a popular esoteric publication – touches on a large number of topics.

Presented as “The newspaper of reason and prognosis” (*İdrak və proqnozlar qəzeti*), *Qoroskop* deals with astrology and horoscopes (flower horoscope, fish horoscope, Chinese horoscope, etc.), historical topics, vanished civilisations, parapsychology and bio-energy, magic (e.g. the magical powers of traditional carpets), news from the world press and from Facebook, and – last but not least – Islam. Articles and news about Islam deal overwhelmingly³¹ with

²⁹ Although it contains many esoteric elements, Zoroastrianism cannot be considered to be a form of esotericism as such (Riffard, 1997: 520).

³⁰ Whose average circulation ranges from 3,000 to 8,000 readers, compared to 9,800 for the daily newspapers *Azərbaycan* (pro-government) and *Azadlyq* (opposition).

³¹ Possibly even exclusively, but I could not consult all the newspaper's editions.

Shia-related topics such as the Shia holy places (Kerbala, Najaf, etc.³²) and Shia celebrations. Even İlgar İbrahimoglu, a well-known and once turbulent cleric who is also a figure in the struggle for freedom of conscience in Azerbaijan, has advertised from time to time in *Qoroskop*; e.g. to call for believers to come to his mosque on a particular day of Shia celebration.

Broadly speaking, Shia Islam promotes the discipline of the secret (*sirr*), the practice of dissimulation (*kitmân*), and the code/law of silence (*taqiyya*) that have all been historically necessary to protect the faith, and is thus fertile ground for the dissemination of esoteric beliefs (Riffart, 1997: 1128). In Baku and the Absheron Peninsula, which are predominantly Shia areas, this background seems to intermingle with traditional practices strongly associated with the local traditions of the Absheron region, e.g. traditional healers like the *çöpçü* and *çıldıqçı* (see above). Nevertheless, Shia references are also fairly commonly used in other regions, including for divination purposes. For instance, I witnessed a divination session (*fal* in Azerbaijani) in a western Azerbaijani region where the clairvoyant said in a typical Shia way “Ya Ali, Ya Muhammad” before laying her cards on the table. After that she started reciting what was supposed to be a prayer in Arabic, but seemed much more like incomprehensible chanting. In the Azerbaijani context, these popular practices and beliefs are associated with rural areas, while parapsychology, pretty much as used to be the case for psychology in the West, is associated with urban areas. As I was told by someone in the same area:

Parapsychology, this is urban stuff, this is to cure the nerves, the head. But you also have the *ekstrasensy*. The *çıldıqçı* and the *çöpçü*, we really believe in [them]: even in hospitals they say we should go and see them. Some Azerbaijanis who live in Russia, well they come back here especially for that.

Popular occult practices are anchored in both the past and present. Like magic, they are viewed as being able to bring into balance a disenchanted world ruled by scientific rationality that separates reality into isolated fragments (Champion, 2000: 526). More than a worldview as such, popular occulture is rather a resource on which people draw, and a reservoir of ideas, beliefs,

³² Sometimes in a very practical way, e.g. to inform believers that they no longer need a visa to visit various pilgrimage sites in Iran (no. 16(358), 16–31 August 2015, p. 3).

practices and symbols (Partridge, 2004: 84). All these practices and activities were already present during Soviet times and were not prohibited as such, although they were not overtly advertised (Lindquist, 2006: xv). What changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union was the wider offering of services that stressed individual well-being. What is proposed is a single service for a single person. In the same way, astrology is by definition individual and therefore does not take place in groups, except for horoscopes published in newspapers and magazines. Both parapsychology and popular esoteric culture stress individuality in a society where collectivism has dominated for years and where kinship solidarities still play a crucial role in interpersonal relationships. Unlike these practices, which are exclusively oriented towards the “self”, New Religious Movements (NRMs) like the Hare Krishna movement attract individuals who are involved in a personal quest, but as part of a communal group with specific rules and a specific meeting place. (As such, they also offer researchers easier access for fieldwork.)

The Hare Krishna community in Baku

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON; *Vaishnavy* in Russian) – the official name of the Hare Krishnas – was the first NRM in Russia to launch a fully fledged advertising campaign in the early 1990s, although it had been functioning underground for more than a decade. Its founder, Bkhativedanta Swami Prabhupada, visited Russia for the first time in 1971. In the aftermath of this visit, underground groups were created (Menzel, 2012), and ISKCON's text *Bhagavad-Gita as It Is* started circulating as a *samizdat* (illicit underground publication circulated among dissident groups). Until the backlash of 1973 after Soviet–Indian relations deteriorated, when yoga was declared a “Trojan horse of Indian idealism” and therefore incompatible with the official ideology (Menzel, 2012: 166), many basic texts on Eastern religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, and yoga philosophy and practice were available to the Soviet public. Hence, many of the Soviet followers of Krishna throughout the Soviet Union came to ISKCON through their early interest in yoga and India. After the fall of the Soviet Union, ISKCON started advertising extensively on TV,

on the streets and in the underground metro (Shterin 2012, 291), pretty much in the same way as in the West. A substantial part of the Baku community's founders and important current members claimed to have first encountered Krishna's ideas in this way in Moscow, Kiev or Baku. However, I was unable to ascertain whether this was part of a discursive myth regarding their random (but significant) encounter with Krishna, or if it really did happen in this way.³³ For example, one of the founding members of the Baku community recounted:

I went to Moscow, to the Blokhine Institute, for treatment – I had cancer. When I went out it had rained a lot. I was on a street, I looked at the ground, and in the gutter I saw a picture that was being carried along by the flowing water; it was a picture of Jesus. So I took it, I dried it on my coat, and put it in the pocket of my coat. This was in 1988. And here, in the metro, I came across a grandmother who was distributing Krishna's books as *samizdats*. She told me, "If you buy this book, you will be happy and healthy forever".

For his part, the current head of the Hare Krishna temple recalled the more traditional way in which he became interested in ISKCON's activities:

I went to Kiev in 1993 to study economics. My grandmother, for example, used to pray, but I wasn't interested in religion at all. I was interested in sciences, arts; at school I had a "philosophical mood" (*filosofskoe nastroyenie* in Russian). I wanted to understand religion, but as a science. So in Kiev some people had set up a stall on a street with some books; this was very widespread at that time. I had a look and I bought *The Science of Self-recognition* (*Nauka samosoznaniya*). I didn't even know what it was; I just felt attracted by the title. If I had known that it was about religion, I wouldn't have bought it. When I returned to my students' residence I started reading at 4 p.m. [and continued] until 3 a.m.!

While currently Hare Krishnas are prevented from spreading their beliefs openly in Turkey, they were first registered in Soviet Azerbaijan in 1989.³⁴ The first foreign gurus, who presented themselves as yoga practitioners, visited Baku as tourists in the late 1980s and stayed a few times in one of the well-known Intourist hotels, the only hotels that were officially accredited to host foreigners in the Soviet Union, as one of the community's founders explained to me:

³³ For converts, life narratives are a norm (Roy, 2008: 38).

³⁴ Ironically, followers in contemporary Turkey follow exactly the same route as their predecessors in the Soviet Union, practising their faith under the guise of engaging in yoga activities.

We invited two gurus, one from India, one from Britain, without mentioning the real purpose of their visit. They were dressed in normal clothes. We booked two luxury rooms for them at the Intourist hotel, but they slept on the floor while the translator slept in the bed, because ... at that time in those hotels non-official couples used to meet, or high-ranking people met with their lovers, etc. Then we found a solution because I had a three-room flat where they would stay when they were in Baku, and I would go and stay at the neighbours' house with my daughter. Then I bought a second apartment and there was no longer a problem (informant 3, Baku, 18 January 2016).

Another person who used to be interested in ISKCON activities before turning to Islam remembered the visit of two followers of Krishna from St Petersburg to her native Mardakan, a village situated in the suburbs of Baku, also in the late 1980s. She added that “artists were especially interested” in Hare Krishna teachings. In the same way, another informant mentioned another important feature of esoteric knowledge in the post-Soviet space, namely its elite character.³⁵ It can be argued that the first open followers of Krishna in Soviet Azerbaijan belonged to the better-off classes in the sense that they had a substantial social and economic network at their disposal. This, in turn, endowed them with a social and economic capital that they could use for the benefit of the organisation. For example, informant 3 further explained that she used to work as the director of a large silk factory in Baku and was therefore given some perks, such as a large apartment, which she put at the disposal of foreign gurus, and the possibility of going abroad, including to India in 1988, where she discovered yoga. This also made the registration of ISKCON easier because she could afford to pay bribes, while her connections in the Azerbaijani administration also helped. Her main argument for being able to register the organisation in Soviet Azerbaijan was that it had already been registered in Moscow: “At that time, what had been done in Moscow had to be followed in the other republics”, as she recalled.

At that time – as is still the case today to a large extent – Moscow was a metonym for Russia and, beyond, for the centre. Thus, Azerbaijan was the second Soviet republic after Russia where the devotees of Krishna were officially

³⁵ In the same way, the success of Buddhism and neo-Hinduism in the West is predominantly a middle- and upper-class phenomenon (Roy, 2008: 47).

registered. Back then, “everything came through Moscow”, and the community had only one teacher and two students. The movement’s literature was also available – and still is predominantly – exclusively in Russian. Not surprisingly, the first followers were mainly Russian speakers, among them an important proportion of Russians and Armenians. Due to the war over Nagorno-Karabakh and because of the socio-economic chaos that plagued Azerbaijan after independence, these followers left the country for Russia, the United States, or even Australia, where they found work as architects, etc., which is another sign of the elite character of ISKCON in Soviet Azerbaijan.³⁶ Until the early 1990s the community used to gather in an apartment in a distant neighbourhood of Baku, but then bought a house that used to belong to an Armenian chief of police who had left the city, in the area of Kara Karayev metro station. In a way, the Hare Krishnas of Azerbaijan – and, more broadly, of the former Soviet Union – have a specific history, and even their own martyrology, due to the persecutions they suffered: when veterans of the community refer to Soviet times, they often speak of the Krishna followers who were sent to psychiatric hospitals or the detainees who made rosaries out of breadcrumbs.

Like all NRMs of its kind, ISKCON seems to be much more dynamic than mainstream religious institutions: a fairly large number of followers of the Baku temple declared that first and foremost they appreciated the interactive character of the preaching, which is called “lecturing”. Not only are followers addressed directly, but they are even encouraged to participate in the “lectures”. This is undoubtedly a positive factor for people living in a society where individuals are unable to voice their own ideas or feelings due to family or community pressures and the repressive nature of the authoritarian political regime. This state of affairs is further aggravated by the persistence of Soviet attitudes that leave little room for people to express their own opinions.

ISKCON followers gather every Sunday from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. The ritual starts with a prayer and a meditation to “leave the past behind and let the future take care of itself”. The lecture is given by an experienced member of the

³⁶ However, this assertion should be balanced by the fact that Russians and Armenians in Baku were usually well qualified, therefore emigrants were generally also well qualified, whether they were affiliated to Hare Krishna or not.

community and lasts for roughly an hour.³⁷ Then followers have a collective meal, which is also a chance for them to socialise with strangers or converse with regular visitors. The Hare Krishna community, as a “world-rejecting/transformative movement”, seeks to build tightly knit spiritual communities rooted in family and religion (Bromley, 2012: 17, 19). This is why rituals are designed to stress love, trust, family, community and the collective, and to draw outsiders into the group (Bromley, 2012: 18). Since the rituals are very informal compared to those of traditional religions, they lead to individual ways of celebrating not only Krishna, but globally the joy of “being there”. This was reflected in the way in which people sang and danced during the third part of the Sunday services (after the lecture and dinner) I had the chance to attend: the men formed a circle in front of the altar, while the women were swinging their arms and bodies back and forth.



Hare Krishna Temple in Baku, Winter 2015-2016.

³⁷ On the two occasions when I attended he was a Baku-born Russian and lectured in Russian.

The first time I went to the temple, on 18 January 2016, approximately 70 people were present, among them four children. Those who attended seemed really diverse, while some people obviously came out of curiosity. A couple of elderly men even wore the traditional Muslim hat while continuously fingering their rosaries. The turnover of attendees was fairly high, with people going in and out regularly, and sometimes returning after leaving for a while. The majority of people were dressed in casual clothes, but some were dressed in traditional Indian clothes. For some girls, a visit to the temple appeared to be an occasion for wearing fancy Indian clothes and jewellery. One of them was drawing on her friend's hands with henna during the lecture. Another was wearing earrings containing a symbol to ward off the Evil Eye. They were chatting with one another fairly loudly. During the dancing and singing session they were the most enthusiastic, together with many other followers, including an elderly Muslim (Shia) woman who had visited Mecca and virtually all the Shia pilgrimage sites in Iran and Iraq. She described how she went to various places of worship in Baku (mosques and churches) and how she still went to a mosque, but insisted that nowhere was the atmosphere as friendly and joyful as at the Krishna temple, to which she had been coming for ten years.

Even if some people came with friends “just to see”, or because they lived in the neighbourhood and the temple represented a kind of weekly attraction, most of those present were guided by an individual approach unlike that of traditional religious communities, and their motivations for attending were likely very different. Beyond the quest for a sense of meaning, which is generally at the core of the individual religious process, curiosity could also have been an incentive. A couple of people clearly came to benefit from the free meals the temple provided, while a group of young men who arrived at the end of the ceremony might well have been attracted by the possibility of meeting girls in a place where community control was presumably less strict than in other places. Of course, motivations for attending may also be mixed.

In a society that had experienced the sudden and rapid loss of shared meanings, symbols, and values, and had to cope simultaneously with war, economic hardships, and social upheaval, an NRM like the Hare Krishna “constructs alternative mythic narratives, offers novel interpretations of the

human condition, and challenges established logic” (Bromley, 2012: 17). Many people I met in the Baku Hare Krishna community explained that they were looking for answers to their questions about life and only found them in ISKCON. A veteran member said that she felt helpless after the intervention of the Soviet army in Baku on 20 January 1990. She was also in need of answers regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The current chair of the temple explained that he was interested in philosophy even before he started reading literature related to Hare Krishna in Kiev:

I was asking myself: “Why are there rich and poor people, differences, beautiful and ugly people? How should I understand diversity?” (*Kak ponyat' raznoobrazie?*). I don't like people who say “we are right”; for me, I wanted to be friends with everybody, no more, no less. And I like this philosophy [Hare Krishna's] that answers all my questions (January 2016).

Established religions, especially Islam and its Quran, are considered not to be sufficiently explicit, with too many hidden meanings and complex elements, whereas the Hare Krishna philosophy is – the community's members claim – a science. As a belief system, however, ISKCON does not determine the way of life of the majority of its followers in Baku. Many of them mentioned that they were in search of a “practical religion” that would help them make the right choices in their daily lives. For some believers, involvement with the Hare Krishna movement has been essentially a stage in a transition to what they were looking for, and eventually found in another religion, like for Fatima:

At that time [mid-1980s] I was working at the local council, in the administration, so it [religious activities] was prohibited. I was looking for some sense, some meaning. We were told that there's no God, that we have no soul – why? I was asking myself a lot of questions and I had no information, nowhere, so I was looking for it, as was my husband as well. My parents had at least explained to me that there's life after death. I was reading everything, everything that I could, Gurdjieff of course, etc. Elmira, a colleague, started talking about Krishna and I became interested. I was already a vegetarian and I was doing some massages. Finally I distanced myself from it [ISKCON] because I didn't like someone putting his own opinions in the texts, or people saying “this is good, this is not”. Then I came to Islam, but it doesn't matter: there's only one God (January 2016).

Whereas this might be interpreted as the mere modification of a market in terms of supply and demand, Fatima's spiritual path also points to the individualisation and privatisation of religiosity that have occurred in post-Soviet societies in the last 25 years.



Hare Krishna Temple in Baku, Winter 2015-2016.

Conclusion

Most studies point at the confusing variety of practices and perspectives that emerge from “occulture”, New Age, NRMs, and methods of healing and personal growth in the West. A loose “nebula” (Champion, 1989), they encompass almost as many forms of praxis as the number of individuals concerned and are mixed with cultural elements, which accounts for the inherently dynamic, fluid, and changing nature of religion in the modern era (Sutcliffe and Gilhus, 2013: 12–13). This is also what the observation of chosen clusters of alternative forms of religiosity in Azerbaijan suggests. While

traditional beliefs and practices serve as a legitimising tool for practitioners, on the one hand, and as reassuring local points of reference for ordinary people, on the other hand, other trends tend to confirm the global tendency of a growing disconnection between religion and culture (Roy, 2008: 208). This is especially true of the Hare Krishna movement, whose Hindu practices have been designed for export and emphasise self-fulfilment (Roy, 2008: 292). That such a movement could take root in Baku, that *ekstrasensy* could become famous thanks to TV broadcasts, or that chic restaurants in Baku offer special brunch menus during Ramadan also reflects the increasing “*marchandisation de Dieu*” (Obadia, 2013) taking place in Azerbaijan, as elsewhere in the world. Finally, the development of the Azerbaijani spiritual market – be it for alternative forms of religiosity or so-called “established” religions – cannot be dissociated from the growing individualisation of faith and related practices that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this respect, only a micro-analysis focusing on this process is likely to help capture the complex and subtle logics related to modern forms of religiosity.

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