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Alternative Spirituality as a Phenomenon of Consumer Society

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In this article discussed the possibility of applying the concept of consumer identity which is widely used in marketing research as an instrument to describe the behavior of the female practices followers. Female practices are belonged to spiritual New Age movement contain religious ideas helped to achieve femininity. Based on the qualitative research it was proved that the behavior of the participants cannot be understood in the frame of the consumer identity concept, it is better to use the concept of consumer strategy. Depending on the choice motives, duration of consumption, the degree of involvement were identified three types of consumer strategies of female practices participants.

Keywords: religious studies, cults, New Age, female practices, sociology of religion, secularization, the consumer society, patch-work religion.

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Because of the cultural and spiritual crises, the processes of secularization in the 70s XXth in Europe has become popular New Age movement; in Russia it was widely spread in the 90s XXth. New Age is a complex of various practices and trends, which are based on mystical and theosophical ideas and characterized by religious syncretism. The magical and occult practices, divination, astrology, alternative methods of healing, etc. are pulled into New Age movement usually. The term New Age refers to the coming astrological Age of Aquarius. In most cases the New Age followers deny the traditional religious affiliation; they are mixed religiosity.

The American scientist H. Geisler points out the doctrines representative to the New Age movement: belief in an impersonal God, reincarnation, the cycle nature of life and death, the man's evolution into a god, the world global order (Kuraev, 1997). New Age followers are actively using occult and well-being holistic practices; adhere to vegetarianism, uncooked plants diet etc.

Alternative spirituality movement is a movement that emerged inside of the New Age religious; its trainings and courses have a predominantly paid character. Free classes are usually used to advertise paid training and courses. For example, to spiritually-commercial practices

are belonged yoga, Chi Kung, transpersonal psychology.

Alternative spirituality movement is mixed religious: spiritual-commercial practices contain ideas from different epochs and cultures. In most cases, teacher has different courses and his career field is quite broad: yoga, Chi Kung, divination, healing, parapsychology, "ethnic" master classes (braiding mandalas, ethnic dances, etc.). Mixed religiosity is typical not only for teachers but also for students.

Taught courses are adapted to the urban life conditions; over there scientific lexicon is actively used: e.g. yoga-intensive, rejuvenation in tissues, restoring and maintaining hormonal balance, management of the endocrine system, ovarian breath. There is the possibility of teaching such kind of practices by means of the Internet.

In contrast to the traditional religious systems, in spiritually practices the continuity of religious life is not depend on affiliation to a certain religious institute, but on unbroken shift between different types of practices. Participants are constantly striving for something new, they are looking for practices that fits their belief system, needs and budget. In spiritually practices the character of the ritual is another than in traditional religions. There is no a structured ritual, with the exception of women's neo-pagan practices; the ritual itself is a plastic and discrete. A follower has the ability to bring something individual to it: to change the sequence of the ritual elements or the sequence of rituals, to let pass some ritual elements, to give individual interpretation of the ritual, etc. An important aspect is an existential experience of the ritual, this point allows to talk about the efficacy of the ritual.

The researchers emphasize the «parareligious nature of spiritually commercial movements» (Egilsky E.E., 2013). Religiosity is replaced by the concept of spirituality; astrology, magic, concepts of human energies have a scientific secular status

for their members. Many participants describe their activities in the spiritually movements as psychological practical courses to solve personal problems and to enhance one's potential. For some of the respondents the religious components of these practical courses were not important, but all interviewed participants acknowledged its presence. In our view, it is appropriate to define the spiritually movements as religious.

In most spiritually practices we can find important for every traditional religious the doctrine of retribution, but the concept of retribution is very specific. It is based on the idea that the Cosmos has the ability to respond to our mental states, that is why everyone reaps the fruits of his thoughts, desires, aspirations. In this regard, the need for unbroken spiritual development is postulated. Restoration or reproduction of sacred connection between man and the Cosmos, Foremother, Rod can be considered as the basis of religion.

Although in advertisements spiritual practices mostly described as physical improving exercise they contain religious elements. The teachers narrate the students, even if fragmentary, about ideas specific to the eastern religions: e.g. the concept of energy, which the correct flow influenced not only on physical health, but also harmonize the human intercommunion with the Universe. The concepts of karma, chakram, the third eye, angels and spirits, the Slavic pantheon of gods are often referred.

Unlike the others new religious movements in the spiritually movements the knowledge or practice are preliminary marketed as a commodity (psychological training, physical exercise, etc.) or service (removal of the evil eye, divination, etc.); the relationship between teacher and the followers have a stressed commercial character, it is similar to buyer-seller relation.

As a distinct from traditional religious mostly spiritually movements do not have a well-defined

structure; depending on current needs participants choose a certain coach or teacher. Only in a few cases, working with a coach continues for a long time: e.g., passed the training, a person keep in touch with his coach, talking about the changes in his life. This helps the coach to evaluate the effectiveness of methods and courses.

The consumer of spiritually practices is volatile and mobile, his behavior is dictated by current needs. There are various types of spiritual courses and services. In order to investigate the existence of consumer identity of the followers we will cover only one segment of the spiritual market and commercial practices – female practices.

Female practices are the various spiritual courses, consultations, workshops, focused on the femininity development, the female energy, the improvement of woman and man relations. Female practices are aimed to create mythology of femininity, to form female character and image. It may contain elements of Eastern religions, ideas of traditional religions, esoteric concepts, etc.

It is rather difficult to build a well-defined typology of female practices, because women practices are very diverse and heterogeneous. We can identify a several types of practices, keeping in mind that they often mix and overlap in unexpected ways: 1) psychological; 2) religious and philosophical type (east block e.g., female Taoist practices, women's yoga, the mandala dance, Lakshmi's course etc. and neopagan block where the fragments of ancient, pre-Christian cults are used, for example, Slavic gymnastics, Gymnastics of Beregins, etc.); 3) well-being physical practices aimed at improving women's health and sexuality (e.g., vumbilding); 4) divination and extrasensory (e.g., attraction of money power, discovery channel the money).

In the 60s of the XX century in the American sociology a metaphor of the free market of

religion was popular. It began with the imminent sociologist Peter Berger. "The pluralistic situation is, above all, a market situation. In it, the religious institutions became marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities. And at any rate a good deal of religious activity in this situation comes to be dominated by the logic of market economics" (Berger 1967). Berger noticed a causal link between religious diversity and secularization, late R. Finke found a link between religious diversity and religious vitality. 'The market has not served as an instrument of mass oppression or crass salesmanship. On the contrary, it has always served as a tool of the masses themselves, a truly liberating and truly enlivening force in the nation's spiritual affairs' (Benek 2010, 67). It is likely that religious pluralism is a precondition to consumer attitude toward religion.

In a consumer society the relation to religion is transformed, various religious and spiritual goods and services can be a part of endless process of consumption. The religion becomes a commodity when religiousness has external ceremonial character, person's religious preferences are formed under the influence of mass media, political circumstances, cultural and historical traditions and popular literature. In this case the religion is used as a sign or as a brand to express the belonging to a certain culture, social group, to show somebody uniqueness. The relation to religion is based on a cliché and stereotypes.

We used the methods of insider's view, content analysis to describe the following features of consumption and product promotion presented in the female practices.

- most of courses and trainings are paid (from 250 rubles up to several thousand), tuition is prepay and precisely defined charge cannot be attributed to donations (Egilsky EE, 2013);

- to attract participants free or relatively cheap workshops are provided; distributed flyers, leaflets, brochures, a system of discounts for early payment are used for successful marketing promotion;
- in Ekaterinburg there are about a dozen women's centers and every as a brand has a certain image and audience. For example, the center of the female transfiguration "Geisha" (<http://u31841.netangels.ru/>) is oriented on successful women, its trainings and courses are expensive, the coaches often use the method of direct sales. Per contra center Freya (<http://freya-ekb.ru>) is a more democratic, it is focused on women of all ages and all social statuses; Freya itself as a center of esoteric knowledge, which helps to grow spiritually to its followers. Thus, the consumer can choose the center that is closest to her idea of herself, belief system, social status and financial capabilities;
- there are quite a large number of women spiritually courses and after attending a training centers by different means try to show the importance of the further study here; we point out that a variety of courses stimulate a demand.

As the consumption principle spreads in religious sphere, in the same time the consumer identity appears. The spiritual followers realize and manifest their affiliation to a certain social group through the consumption of paid courses and specific spiritual goods. We suppose that **the spread of the consumption attitude in religion led to the transfer of the consumer identity phenomenon into religious sphere.**

In the epoch of the information society, globalization of the world economy, the development of Internet technologies social and personal identities are rapidly changing. Together

with the traditional forms of identity virtual, corporate, consumer identities appear. We can find a consumer identity if the self-conception of a person is formed by the commodities he can buy. People use not only things, goods and their signs, but also religious ideas, political theories etc. to express their consumer identity.

Modern industrial society is a society of consumption, in which the key is not only the production of goods and services, but also the production of needs. Jean Baudrillard notes that consumption not only satisfies material needs of a person, but to a greater extent is necessary in order to indicate the social status of a person belonging to a particular class. What matters is not the things themselves, but their signals: "desire for status and the high standard of living is based on the signals, that is not on the things or the good in themselves, but the differences" (Jean Baudrillard, 2006). A person consumes brands, i.e. symbols and images by means of which he aspires to express his difference from the others, his identity. How and what a person consumes are the markers of his status accessory in society.

In this way consumption from simple use of the consumer goods develops into the mean of constructing social identity, provides the sociocultural integration of the individual into society. V.I. Ilyin notes that «the economy of a consumer society leans on new type of the personality. His key feature – longing for consumption as a way of designing of the identity. Owing to this fact the full satisfaction of even basic needs becomes impossible, because identity demands daily reproduction» (Ilyin, 2005). Unlike traditional identities which are defined by sexual, religious, national, professional belonging, consumer identity is substantially changeable and mobile.

According to A. Krylov "the consumer identity is understood as the development of a consumer's own identity through loyalty to

certain brands and manufacturers. Psychological or emotional characteristics of selected brands associated with the chosen manufacturer the consumer transfers to himself” (A. Krylov, 2010). In the structure of consumer’s identity can be marked the following basic components: *cognitive* (social perceptions), *affective* (evaluation, preferences, values) and *behavioral* (intentions, actions).

Thus, the consumer identity of the female practices participants may include the following components: a sense of belonging to a particular social group, acquired confidence in their attractiveness and femininity, the values, which is supported as a result of participation in female practices.

We used qualitative methods to confirm the hypotheses of our study: insider’s view and semi-structured interviews; 10 respondents were interviewed, 4 of which are interested in women’s practices, 4 take or have taken an active part in paid training and workshop, 2 are practicing coaches. As a result the hypothesis that **the spread of the consumption attitude in religion led to the transfer of the consumer identity phenomenon into religious sphere** was not confirmed.

A person chooses those brands that are able to highlight his values and way of life (for example, open-mindedness, willingness to change, mobility, conservatism, etc.). The process of consumption is eclectic and depthless by nature; the consumption never changes the person’s beliefs system. However, finished women’s courses or trainings some followers change their outlook; participation in trainings does not mean the reinforcement of beliefs system that were formed earlier, often quite the opposite, the existing stereotypes are actively changing. For example, in one of the training participants were urged to change their behavior in family. Coach represented as an ideal model for the marital relationship patriarchal family: a

male breadwinner and the woman – the mistress. Thus in contrast of female practice participation the process of consumption is not associated with the consciousness of self.

Despite of the fact that in some trainings formed society stereotypes of male and female behavior are offered, most of the followers from the training’s content take only interesting things and are quite critical of the proposed stereotypes. But they expect that the training have to change some aspects of their behavior and outlook (even if some stereotypes are replaced by others). For example, Olesya said: “Have been visiting women’s practice, I wanted to achieve harmony with my body, exteriorly I looked like a woman, but inside felt myself like a boy”. For her “female practices are an incentive to develop inner femininity, external things are less interesting for me. I do not care whether I wear pants or a skirt. I wanted to get rid of male behavior and learn how to build right relationship with my husband”.

The fact that one of the most important reasons for participation in female practice is the intention to know thyself was confirmed by the results of an anonymous online survey <http://freya-ekb.ru>. According to it most visitors of the site are interested in the development of femininity – 35 %, and the search for its own destiny is important to 30% of those surveyed attendees. (A total of 176 women took part in the survey and they could choose only two options). For many respondents the acquisition of feminine identity associated with the self-actualization, the search for the destiny. For example, finished training some women try to emphasize their femininity: stop wearing pants, grow their hair long, dress with care and airs and graces in behavior appear. Thus formed female model of behavior is attractive to the opposite sex in follower’s opinion. At the same time some women decide to break the relationship with their partners, change jobs, etc.

As can be seen from the above the self-actualization is one of the main reasons for visiting the female practice and it cannot be found in the process of consumption; this point refutes the suggestion that women's practices followers have a consumer identity. Participation in female practice changes some aspects of a belief system, it does not special to the process of consumption.

Secondly, it is enough to visit several training sessions to discover femininity and women rarely attend classes for a long time. Female practice visiting is not demonstrative. On the contrary, to form the consumer identity it is necessary to use the same brands and products for a prolonged period and a consumption, as a rule, has a demonstrative character: e.g., to maintain the social status someone buys expensive furniture brands.

In our opinion the use of the concept "consumer identity" to describe the female practices followers' behavior is unproductive because it is a variant of reductionism and generally simplifies our theories. To study the behavior of the female practices followers' is better to use the term "consumer strategy" instead of consumer identity. Consumer strategy involves the next components: the motives of choosing female practices, the duration of their use, the degree of involvement in the participation, the desired result. In the course of qualitative empirical research, we have identified three types of consumer strategies of female practices followers':

- **Weltanschauung strategy:** active participation in various spiritual commercial practices respondents associated with philosophical search, female practices participation is one of the aspects of the religious and philosophical search for them. As a rule, they attend female courses on the recommendation of their coaches or friends. In this

case women are more attentive to the religious and philosophical content of the component of women's practices;

- **Psychological strategy:** a woman comes to female practices to solve her psychological problems – problems in relationships or their absence, problems at work, etc. In this case, the religious and philosophical component of women's practices for the participants plays a minor role; and if it is presented a large, it can be a cause for distrust of the coach professionalism;
- **Communicative strategy:** this behavioral strategy is more peculiar to the respondents who participating in female practice seen as a leisure, they are less likely associate their participation in female practice with self-actualization and does not desire to solve complex psychological problems.

Conclusion

Our qualitative research proves that consumption attitude toward religion in postindustrial society changes the traditional religion forms. Spiritual movement is a case of a consumption attitude toward religion. In it the religious continuity depends on unbroken shift between different types of spiritual practices. Participants are looking for practices that fit their belief system, needs and budget; they change practices and coaches very often. The ritual is not structured, it is plastic and discrete. A follower always has the ability to bring something special and individual to it. Followers have no affiliation to a traditional religious institute, thus their religiosity is patch-work and mixed. Ideas of different world religions eclectically combined with each other, in most cases it is non-systematic and not-thought-through mix of different religious ideas and practices. Respondents often do not realize the contradictions within their own

religious system, for instance, the contradiction between monotheistic and polytheistic ideas. In rare cases, a respondent seeks to create a coherent system of religious beliefs and resolve conflicts arising in it. A person chooses from the variety of religious ideas and practices those which are the most suitable for his/her life style and discards those burdensome practices. Such person tends to use religious and spiritual practices as a certain instrument to solve his/her

own problems: family problems, difficulties at work. It is a type of a consumer approach to a religion.

We found that the female practice followers have different purposes, attending workshops, seminars and master classes. Depending on the type of consumer strategies religious component is sought of great interest or only some ideas irreflexive eclectic absorbed and some ideas discarded.

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Спиритуально-коммерческое движение как феномен общества потребления

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В этой статье рассматривается возможность применения понятия потребительской идентичности, которое широко используется в маркетинговых исследованиях, для описания поведения участниц женских практик. Женские практики – это практики, относящиеся к спиритуально-коммерческому движению Нью Эйдж, содержащие идеи религиозного характера, направленные на достижение женственности. На основании качественного исследования показано, что для описания поведения участниц целесообразнее отказаться от понятия потребительской идентичности, а описывать их потребительские стратегии. В зависимости от мотивов выбора женских практик, продолжительности их потребления, степени вовлеченности были выделены три типа потребительских стратегий участниц женских практик.

Ключевые слова: религиоведение, новые религиозные движения, Нью Эйдж, женские практики, социология религии, секуляризация, потребительская идентичность, лоскутная религиозность.

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