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**W094 Rethinking Spirit Possession**

**Demons and paths to church adherence ('votserkovlenie'):  
possession and conversion around Russian Orthodox exorcists**

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**1. Introduction: Possession and conversion**

In this paper I look at the personal experiences and social repositioning of people diagnosed as possessed or under demonic influence in a certain period of their life. Based on my fieldwork experience in Sergiev Posad I argue that it is useful to connect the study of demonic possession and exorcism/deliverance to conversion studies in order to understand the cognitive and social transformations under way. Religious conversion is often described as a radical reorientation of the self followed by a series of cognitive and social transformations which consolidate commitment to a new faith. Recent studies also argue that it is useful to look at religious conversion as a long personal transformation, a process rather than an event, a gradual transformation rather than a rupture. Possession is defined as an experience of presence and influence of alien spiritual forces within the person, often climaxing in moments of 'loosing control' over the behaviour and speech. An eventual exorcism or deliverance 'restores' the self into its 'natural' state and the person regains his/her control over his/her behaviour/body. I argue that it is useful to look at the intersection of the transformative processes covered by these terms in order to understand how religious ideas and institutions can help people to understand and explain personal experiences of disorientation and 'lost control', offer guidance for future personal behaviour and open niches to reposition the converts in the midst of social transformations. Processes present in exorcism and conversion share a common feature from the perspective of the individual of recovered meaning and regained control over the capacity to act in life with the guidance of religion.

During my fieldwork I encountered several cases (mostly women) whose religious career was closely associated with personal experiences of suffering and relief from demonic influences. In these cases deliverance or exorcism from possession was followed by strong adherence to the parish and its associated structures (ex. serving as aides in the church, the canteen of the parish ('trapeza') or hostels built around the church etc). Therefore my paper is exploring the intersection of these two concepts and argues using two empirical cases of post-possessed converts that the transformations associated with possession and exorcism can often lead to conversion.

Large part of the conversion studies focus on missionary work and conversion to Christianity in the protestant and neo-protestant denominations. The anthropological study of changing church adherence ('votserkovlenie' – in the Russian case) and conversion is relatively neglected in the Eastern Christian traditions (Hann 2007). The empirical studies on experiences of possessed people and their conversion careers in Russia today can show that these phenomena far from being survivals 'from times long passed' are better understood as responses to contemporary social transformations and the postsoviet way to 'modernity'.

Demonology plays similar role for Orthodox Christians as do notions of purity and impurity/defilement: it is good for delimiting and orienting action and experience in order to defend people from sin, filth and suffering. These are the sources of illness, possession, and eventually of eternal death. If the ideas of witchcraft warn of dangerous human relationships, demonology is even more comprehensive: it includes all manifestations of evil in the world. The knowledge about demons contributes to the understanding and explanation of human behaviour and decisions. In the cases presented below the concept of demonology helps deciphering why conservative views and attitudes are appealing to some of the new converts.

I will present the case studies of two women below. They are two examples among the many converted women I encountered in Russia. Their cases support my claim about the usefulness to build a bridge between studies about possession and conversion. They also appear as somehow 'untypical' cases in the contexts of studies about possession: in my view both of them are powerful, strong and talented women, with successful lives. I would like to suggest that those accepting the discourse of possession

and living with the conscience of miracles are not always the powerless and marginal in the society.<sup>1</sup> Although they might not be typical cases, their life histories and the suffering they passed through reflect on some central features of the post-soviet reality. The two cases illustrate two typical kinds of conversion: 1) the conversion and ‘inchurchment’/church adherence (‘votserkovlenie’) of baptised but faithless, distant, inactive persons; 2) the conversion of those not baptised, born in Soviet Union, descendants of Orthodox grandmothers and grandfathers.

The cases presented are based on long conversations and participation in the everyday life of these women. I developed rather close relationships with both of them; they do not know each other. While presenting the life stories below I reflect on the conversion scenario suggested by Lewis R. Rambo and I will localise the role of possession in the conversion process. Rambo distinguishes between different stages of conversion (crisis, quest, encounter between the advocate and convert, interaction, commitment), and also the context and consequences of the process (Rambo 1993).

In connection to this my main questions are: What is the role of demons and the Devil in the process of conversion? What is the role of possession (or the fear of being repossessed) in the present life style of those converted/converting?

## **2. Becoming a sinner and aiming at ‘duhovnost’ (spirituality): church adherence of a middle-aged woman (Lara)**

I met Lara first after some months of fieldwork, when I already made a number of friends. She was introduced to me as a friend of a friend. I met her at the church ‘Petra i Pavla’<sup>2</sup>. Lara used to come in the weekends from Moscow in order to help with the accounting of the parish. She also regularly participates in the religious service (Liturgy) at the same church. As she used to come here for some years, everybody knew her, all the

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<sup>1</sup> Later on we will see how we can regard them as marginal, as kind of migrants who later on repatriate, discovering something authentic at ‘home’ in ‘Svyatoy Rus’ (Holy Russia).

<sup>2</sup> This is the church situated close to the monastery, where father Herman is the ‘nastayatel’. His clientele at the exorcisms in the monastery is welcome every day in this church to confess to one of the priests, at ‘soborovania’, ‘moleben’ etc. as well as at the ‘sluzhba’ in the morning. The exorcism is held in the afternoon starting with prayers at 15:00 pm, lasts until 19:00. At 16:00 arrives father Herman and begins his sermon which is followed by the exorcisms red by him and blessing with holy water, anointing with holy oil.

people employed there and also the regular visitors. I became aware quickly that she is a very close person to father Herman, and she somehow enjoys privileges also. Lara is spending most of her time in Posad together with father Herman and his most important guests, his residing family members, and she is a close friend of his sister etc. Being an accountant for him is also a confidential role, being able to oversee the financial matters of the parish, the amount of money and the nature of material transactions<sup>3</sup>.

I never had a formal interview with Lara. I asked her once if she can agree to use a tape recorder to register our conversation. She looked puzzled and made me understand that she can agree but this will deteriorate the situation. I will lose the intimacy and depth of communication. I stopped asking being satisfied with what I learned during my returning visits to her. As time passed our communication only gained in intensity. She tried to teach me something she realized during the last two decades. She told her story in order to let me know the dangers and save my life. Conversations with her were always a combination of retelling the past, speaking about the present and the future. She revealed her hopes and expectations when speaking of the future. She also always investigated my past and present, and tended to give advices to have a better future than my present condition seemed to her.

The first visit to her 'kelia'<sup>4</sup> had an air of curiosity. She was not less interested in me, than I was in her. The friend who presented her left and I had the opportunity to get in touch with a charming, reflective and complex woman, who in this stage of her life lives an intensive religious life, experiencing something like *communitas* with those around and hoping for forgiveness. She wears very simple clothing, and always covers her head outside the 'kelia'. The room was small and contained only the most necessary

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<sup>3</sup> As I suggested in earlier presentations, the exorcisms bring considerable amount of money. Pilgrims are encouraged to come to the church Petra i Pavla, where they also offer money. There is money offered to father Herman as donation. Grateful clients return and help with subsidies. Money flows in and many initiatives were taken during the last years. A school which already functions there and the guesthouse with two different 'trapeza' proved to be insufficient. Two new houses were bought and renovated, housing further members of the staff, helpers, pilgrims and different guests. People working at the parish and adjacent institutions are recruited among pilgrims and those cured by possession, or their family members, friends.

<sup>4</sup> There is a fashion in using the term 'kelia' which means cell, instead of room among deeply religious people. They mean by 'kelia' a modest place ('skromno') adequate for praying, reading and sleeping, but less for social life, and not suitable at all for family life. The term denotes originally the room inhabited by a monk or nun in a monastery. In the house next to the church, hosting other rooms, kitchens, trapeza, school, Lara had a permanently reserved room.

furniture (a bed, a table, a chair, some small shelves and a coat stand used as clothes closet). There are numerous icons as well (printed on paper, not originals) and several portraits of father Herman.

Lara was born in a simple family in a distant countryside and came to Moscow to study economics during the Soviet times. After finishing her studies she got a very good job in an office in a ministry. She worked there until her emigration. She married and bore a son. Due to her personal abilities and to the social context she was able to make friends among high ranking party cadres and intellectual elite of the time. These relationships remained determining and helpful until present.

Lara left Russia in Gorbachov era, before 1990 together with her 12 year-old son. She moved to Switzerland where she has found work with the help of her friends. Her son lived and learned in an elite boarding school for years. She enjoyed freedom and had an active social life, with numerous friends. She was perceived by them as a very nice and lively person, some special sort of human being with a warm Russian soul. Her memories of those times are shadowed by a strong and unforgettable moral problem: she divorced, left his husband in Moscow and developed a new relationship with a married Italian man whom she never married. She recognizes that she left her husband because of her interest in a new relationship and feels guilty. At the time she was not caring about her husband's efforts to help her and maintain the family. Now she perceives her life as full of sin and polluted because of this extramarital sexual relationship.

Her life in Switzerland seemed to be perfect for a while. She lived in a beautiful place near a lake in a nice house.<sup>5</sup> Her son was fine. She had a good job and enough money. She come to know really nice people, gain in understanding local culture and learned a very good Italian, as well as German, some French and also English. But at one point in this saturated life she fell depressed and developed strange allergies. Later on she recalls the period as suddenly becoming hopeless, with all the available material and social capital irrelevant. At this point the quest appeared. She became open to something

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<sup>5</sup> Her living conditions under soviet rule were certainly modest. She lived with her family in a simple block flat in Moscow. Her sister, who is a teacher in Moscow lives at the present in the outskirts of Moscow in a modest block flat. Her brother until recently lived at home with the parents. Now he lives and helps at the church Petra i Pavla in Sergiev Posad.

new – but old as well. She went to Moscow, where had some sharp experiences deepening her doubts in her lifestyle.

Coming closer to her motivations for repatriation I can understand that she feels guilty also because she lived an easy and luxurious life in the West, until she visited in 1992 Russia and Moscow again. She was struck by the poverty of her country and the deep problems of that period. Although this visit does not resulted in a quick change in her, a process began; she started travelling home, listening more to the opinions of local Russians. Within some years she established a Russian-Italian business company in Moscow, bought a flat in central area of the city and moved home. Certainly, the problems she perceived at home and her feelings of guilty were not sufficient to make the decision to return. The repatriation was not that straight process either: for a while she maintained her home in Switzerland and returned regularly to visit her friends. She took them also with her to visit Russia, especially Moscow and Sergiev Posad.

I would like to sketch now how she recalled the changes in her religiosity during these years. In the time of perestroika she was the type of distant person who sometimes entered the church for some minutes to light a candle ('podstavit' svechku'). She prayed, but escaped as soon as possible, telling God that she is busy with work and cannot afford staying for long, in any case not for a whole 'sluzhba' (1 and half – 3 hours service). She felt enough comfort legitimating her behaviour this way.

While she lived in Switzerland, she attended usually the local Protestant and Catholic Churches with friends but she felt those churches too 'cold' for her cultural expectations and 'empty' – without the beautiful interiors she loved, lacking in the smell, ritual/ceremony, singing, and beautiful clothes etc. (Many people emphasize the aesthetics of the Orthodox Mass which moves all the senses of people.) Finally, she missed in those churches the 'duhovnost' (spirituality) present in Russian Orthodox churches. Religiosity in the West seemed to become 'rational' and 'material'.

Coming closer to the middle of the 90's one day Lara had a vision while laying in her bed around nine o'clock in the morning. She observed a monk passing trough her room. He walked somehow higher, not on the level of the floor. The sun was shedding in the room. She cannot understand the vision, but she felt moved and now beliefs it was a

sign telling to turn to religion and church. She says she has never seen an Orthodox monk before. She was already very sick and felt hopeless in her condition. When she came to Moscow after this vision a friend sent her to father Herman. She came with other people to Sergiev Posad, attended the exorcism at their advice and in the church she realised that it was father Herman she has seen in her vision. She attended many times the exorcism; it was always a pleasure to listen to ‘that simple but wise sermon’. In the beginning she cannot stand in the church, she felt no power in her legs, only pain<sup>6</sup>.

Once she fell in front of him during the exorcist prayer. This day she spoke to him first. There is no doubt in her soul that she was cured by him of all her sicknesses, which – according to his views /expressed also in the sermon/ - were the consequences of her sinful life. She understood only later in Posad, why there is no such ‘blagodat’ (blessing) in the West like in Russia, why there are no miraculous healings. She experienced great number of miracles in the proximity of father Herman, nonetheless realising that all of them has to be assigned to his holy presence. An imperfect person like her, a sinner cannot deserve so many miracles, she says. Father Herman is regarded as a living saint by many of his ‘duhovnie chada’ and those healed. He spends his life in fasting, in prayer and helping according to their view.<sup>7</sup>

Lara recalls that she neglected the church during the soviet times like most of the people. After meeting father Herman and listening to his sermon, she learned that her life was not virtuous enough for an Orthodox Christian, because she divorced and had a relationship with a married man. She learned to perceive herself as a sinner and internalised these new morals so much that she had to transform slowly all of her life. When she moved to Moscow and worked in her Russian-Italian business company during

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<sup>6</sup> This feeling is commonly reported among neophytes and it is attributed to demonic attacks. When I began attending church services it was expected to feel similarly. I got acquainted quickly with the long services and did not suffer because of standing. Nonetheless my acquaintances always tried to reserve me a seat somewhere in the church and came during the service to tell that I can go there whenever I feel it necessary. In some cases I accepted; beside the whole-night liturgy at Easter this happened in the village Podsosino, where only one priest serves and liturgy lasts for very long every Sunday. Usually all the people confess; during confession the service cannot continue like usually. The church is extremely cold even in summertime. Parishioners used to heat it with an old stove. There are several chairs and a bank near the stove. I accepted to sit there mostly because of extreme cold. But this became uncomfortable soon, as the confession was going on next to me. I cannot hear the confession, but being so close, I believed those confessing cannot feel comfortable. I moved.

<sup>7</sup> There are critical voices also among his personal acquaintances, most frequently among local clergy and students of the seminar and ‘Akademia’.

the weekdays every Friday she came to Posad and helped at the parish. She mostly had a diplomatic role at the 'trapeza': she was helping to keep contact with newcomers (pilgrims coming to the exorcism) and she also did the accounting. This was seemingly unchanged during some years. But under appearances she deeply changed; she developed deep religiosity, internalised dogmas, and rules. These weekends became increasingly important, and during the last year she told me she feels that her work is boring at the company and also needless. Time for change has come: she must give up working in Moscow, move to Posad and dedicate her life to help people there and to contribute in developing further whatever she can at the parish (kitchen, school, etc.).

Her son got married and lives in Moscow. He has a well-paid job. When he married, Lara moved out from their luxurious apartment in the centre of Moscow. They rented it and shared the income with her son. She lived for some years with her sister in a small and modest apartment in the peripheries of the city. Still many times went to help her son by taking care of their daughter. Now she feels something went wrong; she could not convince her son to become religious. He cannot understand the sense of it and does not wish to save himself. He is completely dedicated to his business and money-earning. Lara told his story warning me that if I do not choose the right way joining the Russian Orthodox Church, if I leave Russia and will continue to bring up my children in the West, something similar can happen to me. She regrets she did not recognized in time the right way. If she would have gone to a monastery with her child instead of emigrating, today her son would be a different person.

### **3. The process and consequences of conversion in a young woman's life (Tina)**

I met Tina first in the Ilinsky church. I already knew two priests serving there and some of the people attending the services. Tina was introduced by a new acquaintance, who told me secretly that Tina is a Moldovan ('moldovanka'), and maybe she will accept to speak to me in Moldovan (Romanian). She knew I would enjoy a talk in some home-language after so much effort with my new Russian. The acquaintance did not forget to advice me that I should not address Tina in Romanian from the beginning, as she might



prefer to keep her language skills in secret; she never speaks openly about her ethnic origin. The acquaintance also noted that Tina's Moldovan origin is recognisable once one listens attentively to her speech which is saturated with the sounds of her natal dialect of Moldovan. Keeping in mind her advice I waited for the end of the service when Tina will be liberated of her duties - she was singing in the church choir. When the service ended, she came to me and addressed me with a usual but official Romanian greeting ('Bună ziua!'). The language question was solved, at least for this first conversation.<sup>8</sup> She was very keen to meet me, and openly told me some basic information about herself and her family situation (she is 37, married with a local Russian man of 36). We talked for a while about church services and 'zapiski' and she shortly invited me home for lunch<sup>9</sup>. She was dressed in a white blouse, abounding in decoration, had a long skirt, very similar to the usual dress code of local 'in-churched' Orthodox (votserkovliionnie). Her head was covered with a thin white scarf, closer to the style of Old Believers, but not unusual among the other women from the choir. She was both elegantly dressed and embedded in local culture. While talking her gestures were different from that of local Russians, reminding me more to that of some Romanians I met elsewhere.

After this first meeting we spoke many times in different settings: in the church or churchyard, in her home, in the school (where she works), in the graveyard during a ritual etc. We talked for two or three hours several times. She felt more confident and spoke openly when no member of her family (husband, mother-in-law) was present. During our long talks she disclosed to me some of the 'secrets of her past life' of which nobody among her local acquaintances was aware.

Tina was born in a family with a peasant background in rural Ukraine. Her parents made a career as communists. The region where she originates is close to

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<sup>8</sup> We met many times after this. She mostly spoke Russian to me as she felt disconcerting speaking in Romanian, when others are around.

<sup>9</sup> It was pretty rare in the field, to get this kind of invitation at the first meeting but sometimes it happened. Among those who invited me in this way I think it was a Gagauz from Moldova, as I found out later. She knew some Romanian too, but we never spoke Romanian, she just inserted Romanian words in her speech sometimes. How important was ethnicity or region of origin in this place with local Russian majority but many immigrants I can illustrate also by the example of a half Hungarian, half Russian 'matushka' (wife of a priest) I met her almost in the end of September, in the last Sunday spent in Posad. She was very happy to speak Hungarian with me, to share the story of her life and troubles of her marriage, of bringing up four children, staying home as is usual there for the wife of a priest, being isolated from her cultural environment (she grew up and studied English in Budapest) etc. We developed a kind of friendship practically after leaving the field; she writes/calls regularly.

‘Kishiniov’ (Chişinău) the capital city of today’s Republic of Moldova. Tina studied in Kishiniov at the Faculty of Fine Arts during the late Soviet times. She finished her studies and specialised as a cultural manager. The Soviet Union collapsed while she was studying so she found herself in a different country. She started to work in a school but soon left her job and entered some business to earn more. She earned considerable amount of money and bought a flat but she lost it as quickly as she got it. By the time of her troubles in business (age 22<sup>10</sup>) she also experienced a crisis of human relationships. She felt alienated from her family because of the physical distance but increasingly also in terms of culture as well. She went through a process of acculturation like so many young persons living and studying for years in a very different environment. She was seeking support in friendships but these also came to a limit. It seemed to her that she lost friends as she was losing money and material goods. In this time of crisis she experienced strange states of mind and soul.

She was possessed by demons, she told me. She felt that an alien force is controlling and driving her from inside. She committed bad deeds she never wanted to. Today she is using the language of possession when she talks about the past experience, but from her story I understood that she knew nothing about possession at that time. She was not preoccupied by the idea of demons and exorcism. She started to learn about the existence of them later. My understanding of the situation is that she seeking for help, and let herself led by those around her. She entered and accepted an explanation offered to her.

Now she says it was because she has not chosen the ‘right way’. She baptised soon and changed her occupation. She moved together with a young divorced mother and her 10 year old son, and worked in the household, looked after of the little boy for three years.

In the continuation of her story the context (Rambo 1993) is very important: during the early years of the post-soviet period people were receptive to matters of religion. The topic of becoming religious and being baptised is often discussed. Many adults turn to the Orthodox Church in order to be baptized, yet others turn to different

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<sup>10</sup> In the Soviet Union and today in Russia high school is finished at the age of 17. University studies start and end earlier.

neo-protestant denominations, as did several relatives of Tina in Ukraine. Those attending the church already gain knowledge and receive an alternative meaning for the suffering and torturing states not only the explanation of ‘nerves’. In Tina’s case the signs driving to the church appeared early but she had to pass through a long way of ‘votserkovlenie’ with questioning dogmas and advices, and doubting the results. She was converted to Orthodoxy and she attended the church (the Russian Orthodox Church) for many years. Her conversion was triggered by exorcism and it was a long process. She was guided back to rigid rules of religiosity many times not only by her spiritual father, but more intensely by her fear of demons and Devil.

I return now to her story. Recognising her trouble and serious suffering, a colleague told her she must be baptised<sup>11</sup>. A neighbouring ‘babushka’ took her soon to the church. She stepped first time in a church; until then she laughed at everybody who went to the church and crossed herself believing firmly that church is needed only by those escaped from the mental hospital. She was baptised, but it does not help her because she did not believe. She still attended church services; soon she developed a serious condition, it was visible that she suffers deeply. A woman that time approached her in the church and told her about a ‘hieromonk’ at a local monastery whom she can address for exorcising the demons from her body. She contacted the monk and he begun the exorcisms. For 40 days he lived only on bread and water and carried a sack with bricks during the church service as a sacrifice in order to save her soul. All this was needed in order to prepare the prayers for exorcism (Molitva lui Sfintu Vasile, ‘which cannot be read by a common priest, only by those pure/without sins).

Tina told the story emphasizing the sacrifice and devotion of the monk contrasted by the indifference of her parents who never came to support her during that difficult period. She was completely alone during the exorcisms, which sharply contrasts with the usual practice.<sup>12</sup> Usually those who are suspected to be possessed are accompanied by

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<sup>11</sup> During soviet times in many places it was possible to baptize children secretly at home, by calling the priest. Her father was a firm communist who did not allowed to baptize her.

<sup>12</sup> Not only in the Orthodox Churches, but in many cultures worldwide it is customary to accompany family members or friends at the exorcism and to support them morally but also physically. Tina suffered missing this kind of warm support, and believes she would have been less at the mercy of demons if she wouldn’t be alone. The demonic attack at the exorcism resulted in distorted movements of her body she was controlled and directed by the demons. The presence and support of close ones would alleviate her condition.

family members (mostly women) to the exorcism. Maybe she would have some support if she would have been at home, but she lived for some years in a distant place where nobody came to visit her<sup>13</sup>. She suffered very much during exorcisms but she felt better already after the first prayers.<sup>14</sup> She closed her story by emphasizing that if this does not happen to her, she would never believe it was possible. “Without this experience I would never become an Orthodox believer. I never liked going to the church, I wasn’t even interested in it.”

There is no doubt in her soul about the effectiveness of exorcisms. On the contrary it was one of the deepest experiences of her life with serious consequences. She discovered the existence of dark realm of demons and started to learn how to defend herself and also tried to help others. During the exorcisms she developed a close relationship to the priest. She confessed to him, listened carefully to his advices and trusted him more than anybody else. She gave him a key role in her life as a ‘duhovnik’ (spiritual father). In the last 12 years she followed all the time his advices. Several major changes occurred in her life during this period.

She left illegally to Israel to work, lived there without passport and registration for 6 years. She worked in households, doing cleaning and baby sitting. She earned considerable amount of money (around 1500 dollars per month, a huge salary for a young girl from Moldova or Ukraine at that time). Although it was extremely important the priest’s support in leaving the Republic of Moldova and also her home in Ukraine, once being abroad she lived ‘not entirely Orthodox life’. She went to the beach to sunbath, attended concerts and the disco, spent a lot of money just for having fun. Than it seemed to her that this life will never end. She felt in a completely secure economic situation, and there were no reasons to worry. She had no plans for the future at all, no other perspectives than continuing this life style. She felt fine; after all she lived in Jerusalem,

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<sup>13</sup> Her parents never came to visit her in Posad. She travels once a year home with her husband who does not like the place, suffers because of hot summer, peasant household duties etc. Tina have not seen her mother for a period of four years until last summer. Her mother was working in Italy and she did not even attend their wedding which happened two years ago.

<sup>14</sup> She still remembers the pressure in her chest; later she felt this pressure in churches and monasteries visited during her pilgrimages. She related ‘classical’ reactions of possessed persons; the demons cannot suffer anything sacred, for ex. the sign of the cross or the sound of the church bells; the demons made her speak awful and to behave violently and in a wrong way, tempted her to commit suicide.

at some meters from the holy grave of the Saviour. She felt like in the bosom of God (“ca în sânul lui Dumnezeu”).

During her stay in Jerusalem she fell in love with a Jewish boy from Ukraine who came to visit Israel. He came frequently because he had no problems with getting a visa. They planned to marry and the young man promised to convert and be baptised to fulfill her wish to have a Christian husband: “to have at least the same religion” – if ethnicity remains different anyway. She returned to Ukraine, went to visit the Jewish family, to meet the parents. The mother was completely scandalized by their idea to marry and told her that she will never agree to let her son being baptized. Although the young man offered to her to live together without marrying, and to get married later when the spirits in his family calm down, she refused and dropped out from this relationship. She had to make a difficult decision as she loved him very much.

Christianity and the religious harmony of the couple was not the only matter for her to worry about. She discovered something odd and disturbing about the family. The father of his lover was a sorcerer the son had to inherit his knowledge at the age of 30. She knew about him that he reads books on magic before, but now she had the opportunity to observe how he is really engaged in magic. She saw him practicing. To be married to a sorcerer exceeded her imagination. She could not live in the proximity of demons after her experiences from Kishiniov.

If I reflect on her life history I see two concurring attractions: one for the secular life, worldly pleasures, money and freedom in action and thinking; the other for the spirituality/religion, moral purity, respecting the limits, and receptivity to the guidance of a trustable authority. She oscillated between these two temptations. All further major decisions in her life were blessed by the monk from Kishiniov. Sometimes she did not follow his advices, but it became definitely clear to her that only those initiatives were successful which had his blessing. I wish to illustrate her oscillations in recounting the process of her conversion, the pitfalls and signs of support as she recognised them.

I already mentioned she never thought about leaving Jerusalem. But one day the ‘duhovnik’ called her and told her, that the time came for returning to her country. Jerusalem became a dangerous place to live as bombings happened. The monk advised to settle in Russia, in Moscow region, Sergiev Posad. She gathered the money, the monk

told her, she can afford to live in Russia. Ukraine and Moldova are poor countries, in Russia it is a dynamic development. Her parents never behave in a supportive way to encourage or expect her to come home. She had no moral obligations in this respect.

Tina listened to this rationale, and travelled to Moscow with a 'chemodan' (suitcase). For six months was just adrift; combed the city for an apartment to buy but found none suitable for her money. Meanwhile she travelled throughout the country having two main occupations: pilgrimage and parties, the usual dichotomy of this period. She spent again very much money, believing that it is anyway not possible to buy a flat in Moscow. She refused the idea to go to live in Sergiev Posad. She remembers from this period that any time she went to a church, felt a smothering pressure in her chest, a very bad feeling, reminding her of her possession period. She understood that the demonic is around and active.

This idea urged her to turn back to the advice of the monk and finally she went to Posad. Once she was there the view of the Lavra (the monastery) enchanted her. The city's old districts with tiny wooden houses and gardens let her dream about recovering a lost paradise she left back home in Ukraine: the garden of her parents, the household with fresh vegetables and fruits. It was a sensation of arriving home. She also met a nun, , sister Olympia, her old friend from Jerusalem. She soon bought a house with the remains of the money she earned in Jerusalem. She took care of an old woman who had a house close to the Ilinsky church and began to attend church services.

She met her husband and got married. After the marriage the couple changed occupation. The husband previously dealt with catering in a church (food for the 'trapeza') which he abandoned. He decided to work in Moscow and started to study in Moscow at the Missionary Department of the Saint Tichon Institute. Tina first experimented with handcrafting fashionable ribbon bows for small girls to sell them. She managed to produce a big amount and earned good money, but the husband was not satisfied with this kind of work. He encouraged her to try something better and she got a good job in the local Orthodox Gymnasium as a cultural manager. She achieved a considerable career in the city in just a few years as when she arrived her Russian language skills were not very good and she had no local acquaintances. Although her marriage is not without problems, she feels content.

She never feels homesick. Now they concentrate on having a steady life and want to buy a good car. They have a single serious worry: they got no children. She went through all the possible medical examinations and several times went to pilgrimage with the wish of having children (to Matrona in Moscow, to Varnitsa etc.). They have a common 'duhovnik'. He is young priest (younger than they are) who served some years ago in the Ilinsky church. Although he is not there any more, they continue going to this church where they met each other, and where they have most of their acquaintances.

Since a year ago Tina began singing in the church choir together with other women from the parish. None of them is a professional singer only the 'regent'. They sing during the weekends for free, for their own enjoyment. The church employs also three professional women who sing for low salaries during the weekdays. The choir is one of her main communities, the other being the school, her workplace. In the school she performs serious tasks as a religious person: she opens the day by praying together with the children and teachers in the 'hram' of the school (a big room designed as home-church) every morning. She reads the prayers when no priest is present. She is accepted as an authority in religious matters perhaps not only because of her activity in the church-choir and the years she spent in Jerusalem (this is not a secret but her life style). Her husband helps for long time in the altar and studies religion which perhaps increases her prestige also but nobody knows that he has difficulties in passing exams and all his papers are written by the wife during her free time in the school.

#### **4. Discussion of cases in a comparative framework**

Some of the questions I seek to answer: Which are those problems that are interpreted first by non-professionals, later by professional discerners of evil ("expert in evil", Frankfurter 2006) as possession and cured by exorcism? How age, gender, health, family situation, social background, mobility and career influences conversion? What is the impact of economic and political changes on conversion? What kind of changes in life style and personality/self implies the participation at exorcisms and the process of 'votserkovlenie'? How these changes determine what comes later in the person's life?

How can we understand big changes in behaviour, clothing, work, social life, family life, the use of money? Are those converting building up a different self - or they are more continuous than it would be comfortable to accept? How they struggle with the shadows of the past or with present desires which hardly fit the expectations (and moral rules) of Orthodox Christianity?

It is relatively safe to state that Lara and Tina would have another life history if the Soviet Union would not collapse. They perhaps would have had less opportunity for mobility and they were probably less exposed to and influenced by religion. Considering their earlier attitude toward church and religion we can imagine they would have never converted. They experienced the 'temptations' of the new period and as both of them were well educated during the Soviet regime they could experiment with the new possibilities. Religiosity achieved a new status and the ROC gained new opportunities in the transformed political and economical context. but this context did not have as an outcome the religious conversion of all Russian (or post-soviet) citizens. Personal social background, life stage, problems, worries, and the present social environment have not less importance than these macro factors.

The family members, friends, acquaintances, religious specialists or simple believers they meet are also important. It is not accidental that Lara did not convert before leaving the country, and understandable that she converted on her return home. One can also reflect on the complexity of this process: religiosity with the offered interpretation of problems (both personal and global) and her unhappiness and sickness (in the West) mutually influenced each other.

The role of 'advocates' in the process of conversion is considerable. In the case of both women we can observe the need for a guiding authority. For Lara this is father Herman, in the case of Tina the monk from Kishiniov. The influential, charismatic exorcists gained the status of 'duhovnik' (spiritual father) in their life, determining their decisions on a longer term. It seems that there is a difference in accepting these authorities: Lara is made happy by the closeness of the 'duhovnik', she finds satisfaction in helping with different services, sacrificing her time and also donating money, financing different initiatives. There is an expression of doubt and personal will in the



case of Tina, who finally seems to capitulate in front of the advices of the monk out of fear of being repossessed.

Here the age of the women seems essential. Lara is already 55, with grown up son and a granddaughter, she has a life full of events and realizations. As old age approaches, she experiences the psychological need to reflect on her life, on the morality of her choices and decisions. She perhaps already had doubts about her divorce and the relationship with a married man before, these are perceived as problematic enough even in a secular soviet or western culture. But this doubts intensified in the context of sermons and conversations with father Herman and different believers from his parish. She became preoccupied by her afterlife and the coming judgement. This triggered reflection on morality and she stepped on the way of repentance; changed her life wishing to purify herself by prayers and sacrifices (work, moral support and help of the sick, donation etc.). One cannot ignore her vision which she had in Switzerland before her return, but probably her receptivity to visions and related experiences, and her wish to engage in conversations about them increased after her return, during the years when she spent her weekends in the highly religious environment surrounding father Herman.

Visions in general, and visions with father Herman as a hero abound in his proximity, as well as miraculous healings on her exorcisms or those worked by the relics of Saint Sergey. Lara becomes more and more involved in this community. She is engaged in solving the different needs of the parish, school and 'trapeza', this environment becomes her second home. Actually she spends much more time here, than with her family, but she does it believing that she is helping even more, because she is in the right place and prays for them.

In comparison, Tina was still a young girl when she encountered religion. In consequence, her marriage, job, friendships, group adherence are all influenced by religiosity. The experience of exorcism and the interiorised concept of possession is determining in her case. In the following time she always deciphers carefully the possible signs of the demonic presence and keeps a distance from everything dangerous in this sense. It is revealing how strictly she follows rules of Orthodox fasts. She admits that this is far from being a pleasure for her (for example she loves eating meat), but she rigorously keeps fasting because she is scared of demons, which could take advantage if

she fails to follow the rules. Fasting never has been so important in Lara's life, although she is fasting as well in the last years. It is more remarkable how Lara could leave all the luxury of her life; earlier she used to wear beautiful and expensive clothes and fine luxurious jewellery. She dropped those jewelleries forever once she experienced the hardship of her country on her returning in the nineties, she explained to me. But she used to wear her usual elegant clothes until recently and she used to colour her hair. Her friends recall how she looked like; she was a beautiful, elegant lady. Now all this is gone: she is going white naturally and dresses extremely simple similar to the older babushki in the church. This dramatic transformation is hard to understand for her son, who is complaining about changes in her appearance, but also about her moving to Posad.

Demonic is regarded as residing either inside the human being either in the environment (causing temptation). Those who do not experience possession should mainly mind of the means of communication with people and the surrounding world. The simplest mean to avoid demons is to severe or limit communication: speaking, touching are just the main areas need to be restricted but one should also be careful with what kind of persons gets into contact. Fasting is the other main way to avoid the demonic and the impure. Consumption in general has to be restricted, modesty has to be maintained. Ideas about foreign food only synthesise the fears regarding human relationships (dangerous foreigners) and not proper food.

There is an entire arsenal against demons, the possibilities helping believers to purify themselves and maintain purity by confessing, communion, bathing in holy springs, pilgrimages to holy places, prayers, the sacrament of anointing with holy oil, the sprinkling and blessing with holy water etc. Active believers like Tina keep going every weekend to the services on Saturday evening and Sunday morning (which ritually constitute one unit). Tina chose to confess to a different priest in a different church but she regularly takes the communion. Confession and communion is regarded as a cyclical ritual cleaning of the soul and body. Pilgrimages and bathing in sacred spring, or the almost daily use of holy water taken from a sacred spring or from the church in the 19<sup>th</sup> of January (Epiphany/'Kreschenie') serves similar purpose and has curing effects as it drives out the demons lying at the base of the sickness.

I see in the search for a ‘balancing purity’ one of the basic motives for religious conversion. Lara and Tina are coming from simple rural families. They experienced not only different environments, but also a deep change in society. Both experienced large degree of freedom during a certain period of life. It seems the constant changes and also the limitless freedom damaged more than helped them in making sense of their life. Both experienced deep crisis in consequence. Their turn to religion looks like a quest for a “refuge from constant change” (Rambo 1993). We might regard them as “protean personalities”, or as “people vulnerable to charismatic leaders” (Rambo 1993). Probably, this is part of the truth, but knowing them with their sorrows and happiness, reflecting on their life I must recognize they made decisions which were not simple to make.

I would like to reflect finally on the ambivalence of wealth and sexual freedom which seems to be of larger importance and also the main similarity between the two cases. Both women experienced a crisis related in setting up some new business and accumulating for the first time in their life considerable wealth. This new preoccupation with wealth changed their social environment and forced them to reconsider all human relationships ranging from friendship to marriage. These changes resulted in health disturbances too, which later were labelled as of demonic origin. Money thus brought the demons/Devil close or inside these people. It is also telling that both women arrived via Moscow to Sergiev Posad. Mainly because the monastery and the relics of Saint Sergey, Posad is regarded as a holy place. Local folklore says that snakes (or even the lizards) are missing in a 50-75 km surroundings because of the holy bells of the Lavra. In contrast to Sergiev Posad, and to some degree even to the countryside in general, Moscow is regarded as ambivalent or even polluted, partly because it is huge and uncontrollable, but also because of the presence of the many foreigners, and the great number of businessmen. It shares common traits with the West. Moscow even has his own capitalist hell, which from an insider point of view may be regarded as paradise: the Rubliovka district. Not exclusively the religious people talk about how one encounters there all the horrors of irrational consumption of the ‘New Russians’. It is widely publicised in the TV and discussed in everyday life by the locals, recounting scandalising details, like the golden WC inside one of the villas.

The moral ambivalence of extramarital sexual relationships is also a common feature of the two stories. The sexual freedom experienced in the distant capital city Kishiniov or later in Jerusalem is certainly different from what one can expect in a remote village, and very much differs also from Orthodox Christian ideals. Nowadays is commonsense in Russia that serious Orthodox believers do not have sexual relationships before they get married. Extramarital relationships are excluded. Virginity of both of the parties is absolutely expected in a marriage of a priest – although it is not controlled by other means than confession, and exceptions like priest marrying divorced mother with children also happened. Chastity is regarded as something holy, similar to the life of the monks and nuns, and of course to the ideal of saints. Some priests are believed to live in chastity with their wife and this is seemingly added to their charisma. Young girls from the city reported a high rate of chaste relationships with boyfriends, waiting for the marriage. One could interpret this as a consequence of local density of actively religious persons and religious specialists and also attribute to the change in morals due to the influence of the Orthodox Church in the last decades.

Reflecting on the stories of the two women I would like to argue, that their case of possession was somehow constructed or later reconstructed in contact to experts of evil and the supportive believers surrounding them. Lara never believed she is possessed, but she do believes, that she was healed by father Herman’s exorcist prayers. Consequently she admits that her health problems were caused by demons. Tina, as I already mentioned, had no knowledge on demons and no religious interpretation of her problems. Getting in contact with believers who were aware of the possibility of possession she was guided to the church, and once being inside the interpretation and the cure naturally followed. In line with conclusions of several reviews of conversion studies I would like to mention, that in the presented cases we can mention considerable religious change and active preoccupation with religion in the present. But it would be exaggerated to expect, that no further changes can occur during their lifetime.

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