

## THE GREY MARKET OF "INVISIBLE RELIGION" IN LATVIA

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**Abstract.** The paper focusses the rise of self-spirituality in Latvia with particular reference to the supply side of spiritual marketplace, discussing the services provided by two healing and witchcraft centres in Riga by using the publicly available materials. The applied research method is thematic document analyses and the general approach is phenomenological. Latvia has experienced significant diversification of its religious field, part of spiritual developments are not recognized as religious by law and general public. This is called the "grey" religious market.

Healing of common and life threatening diseases, addictions, help in family matters and business, divination in many forms, as well as magical education are common services offered by spiritual market service providers. The services are focused on self- spirituality and empowerment where the client is perceived as a collaborator rather than passive recipient of the service.

**Key words:** alternative spirituality, spiritual service providers, Rumpumpele witchcraft school, Amadeus Maleficus

**JEL code:** Z12

### Introduction - the fuzzy field of "invisible religion"

The national awakening of the late 1980s, the demise of Communist ideology and following restauration of independence brought profound changes to the religious milieu of Latvia. Coexistence of varied religious experiences has always been a feature of religious life in Latvia, and this is particularly true now. Latvia scored 5.7 on the Pew Religious Diversity Index in 2014 - higher than any other Baltic or Scandinavian country (<http://www.pewforum.org/2014/04/04/global-religious-diversity>).

Close numbers of adherents (around 20 % or slightly above) belong to one of three largest denominations – Roman Catholics, Russian Orthodox, or Evangelic Lutherans. There is a steady rise in the numbers of those identifying with the Russian Orthodox church, and this increase has taken place at the expense of those who previously did not profess any religious affiliation (Krumina-Konkova&Misane, 2013; Misane,2014; Misane&Niklass,2016). However, processes within the Christian churches and institutionalized new religious communities represent only part of the dynamics of religious life in Latvia. There is still a sizable part of population who do not identify with any particular religious belief or faith community, and there is growing presence of spirituality usually branded as "alternative", "implicit" or related terms.

The distinguishing feature of alternative spirituality is that it sacralises subjective life (Heelas& Woodhead, 2005, 5). Individuals are free in their spiritual choices, which may draw insights from various religious traditions and/or their personal unique sources of moral authority and spiritual significance. This may result in rather eclectic worldviews and diverse spiritual practices. They may not be recognised as "religious" by law or even by adherents themselves but would still represent "a state of being related to a divine, supernatural, or transcendent order of reality or, alternatively, as a sense of awareness of a super-reality that goes beyond life as ordinarily experienced" (Wuthnow, 2001, 307). As such, this phenomenon fits within the sphere of interest for sociological inquiry.

It was Thomas Luckmann who first turned his attention to it and coined the influential concept of "invisible religion" (Luckmann, 1967). Luckmann recognized the decline of the institutionalized /church-oriented religion during late modernity and described the emergence of individually held beliefs and practices that diverge from the normative understanding of religion.

For Luckmann, religions are primarily symbolic universes defined as „socially objectivated systems of meaning that refer, on one hand, to the world of everyday life and point; on the other hand, to a world that is experienced as transcending everyday life“(Luckmann, 1967:43). Many constituents of symbolic universes may not refer to religion *sensu stricto* (hence its „invisibility“) but still serve as a plausibility structure in which many mundane choices (for example, wellbeing strategies - the choice of medical therapy, diet, education, consumption patterns, career building) and interpretation of their life events are grounded. Contemporary religious field is largely “fuzzy” (Voas, 2009) – individual’s personal symbolic universe is built from several spiritual practices.

This paper will focus on the providers’ side of the supernatural services and how they interpret their own calling. The consumers’ side - scope of unorthodox belief in various forms of the “super-reality”, as Wuthnow puts it, is hard to estimate in Latvia. Some insight could be obtained from the data provided by marketing and public opinion research centre SKDS that had surveyed belief in certain supernatural phenomena and superhuman skills between years 1998 and 2012.

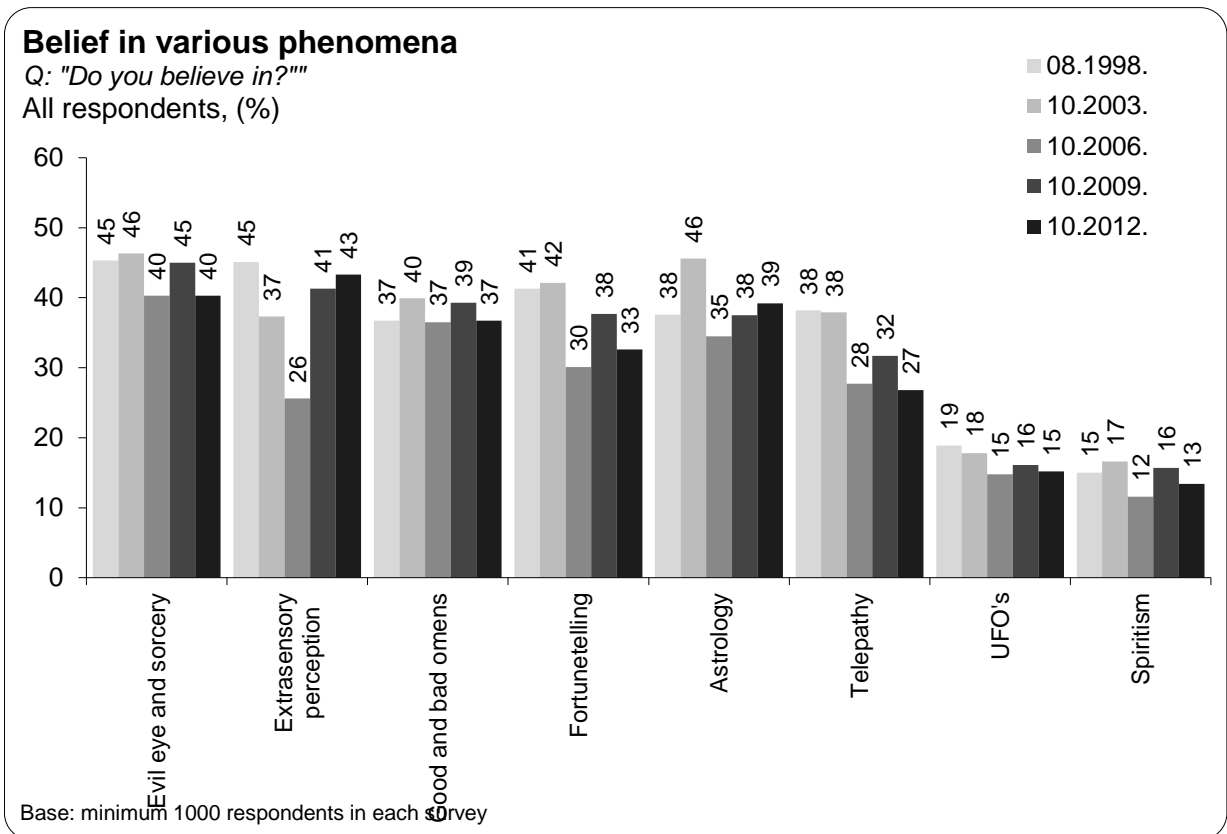


Fig. 1. **Belief in super-national phenomena in Latvia (Data provided by SKDS)**

### The “grey” spiritual market

The data suggest that any provider who may wish to engage in magical and psychic trade can find a receptive market in Latvia. This is even more true for the neighbouring Estonia, considered to be one of the most secular countries in Europe. An Estonian study from 2010 found, for example, that 54 % of the Estonian population believed in astrology, 78 % believed that future events can be foreseen, 58 % - that omens predict future, and 77 % trusted that psychic healers can cure illness (Rommel&Uibu 2015, 12).

The causes for comparatively high and stable levels of the beliefs in the paranormal in the Baltic States and the post-Soviet space on the whole would require a broader study which goes beyond

the scope of this paper. Another question is whether people who responded in a questionnaire that they believed in the existence of certain paranormal forces would actually act upon that belief. Would they really prefer a psychic healer to a medical doctor if they had to choose and the expenses would be the same? But if they did, the suppliers are out there.

Concepts like "spiritual market" or "spiritual supermarket" are metaphors often used to denote the milieu of esoteric beliefs and practices where traditional folk beliefs (like belief in evil eye, various omens and the power of sorcery) intertwined with more novel and popular references to astrology and unorthodox healing practices, and can also include elements from mainstream institutionalized forms of religion. In short, it means that modern consumers can choose a religion and also construct their own version of it from many elements available. For the purpose of this paper, it is also important to note the existence of "spiritual service industry". This term was introduced by Marion Bowman (Bowman, 1999).

Fenggang Yang has suggested a tripartite system of religious markets with respect to how religion is regulated by the state – the red market ( official and/or legally recognized religions), black market (banned religions) and grey market ( religions with ambiguous status) (Yang, 2006). This system was developed on the basis of the religious situation in China – a strictly regulated religious market. The author finds Yang's approach most useful although it requires some modification to be applied in Latvia (and Europe in general). No religion is specifically banned in Latvia, while some religious communities have been denied registration with the state authorities or have not searched for it and hence, from the legal point of view, they do not exist. This is "black market". The "red market" is comprised of all legally recognized religions – the historical mainstream churches, registered old and new religious minorities. The author would suggest to apply "grey market" to those spiritual developments that are not recognized as religions and hence regulated by laws and regulations pertaining to religious organizations but function legally under other forms of legislation – e.g. those regulation enterprises, education or health services. For example, Latvian Register of Occupations includes, as part of *Group 5. Service and sales workers*, also a subgroup of *Other individual service providers*, naming astrologers, hieromancers, occultists, diviners (*zīlnieki*), psychics (*ekstrasensi*) and bioenergists. The specifics of qualifications required for each occupation is not particularly clear; however, there is no doubt that: (a) the above occupations are legal, and (b) their field of work is not regarded as religion despite the fact it would require some form of contact with supernatural powers.

For this study, two providers of services were selected. One is *Rumpumpele*, a certified professional school of healing. However, their own preferred identification is "White witchcraft school" (*Balto raganu skola*). Apart from courses in witchcraft, aromatherapy and massage, *Rumpumpele* also offers services of all kinds of divination and clairvoyancy, bioenergy field balancing, Reiki etc. At their premises at 8 Baznīcas Street in Riga (see [www.rumpumpele.lv](http://www.rumpumpele.lv)), there is a shop selling all kinds of esoteric artefacts. Anita Povecerovska is the Head Witch, she founded the school in 2005. As part of their educational programme, *Rumpumpele* offers both short term courses in cartomancy (for example, a course of Tarot and Lenormand card reading – a three-hour class instruction costs 20 Euros, about ten classes are required for a full course) and an extended two year course in general witchcraft with diverse programme, including classes in aromatherapy (or rather, potions mixing), lithotherapy and colortherapy, Voodoo magic, runes, egg therapy, Reiki etc. Their offer may be broad, but *Rumpumpele* is a small business. According to Lursoft database (latest data are from 2016), the core capital in 2012 was only 10 Lats/14 Euros

and there was only one employee. The firm had paid 2 340 Euros in taxes in 2015, and even less – 1 250 Euros in 2016. Lursoft has given the firm a humble 0.8 stars rating (out of 5).

Another service provider is *Amadeus Maleficus*. The centre is located at 1-1 Akademijas Square, on the ground floor of the building of the Latvian Academy of Sciences in Riga. No business enterprise is registered with this name but several NGOs and one firm uses the same address – Mairis Virsis foundation, International Esoteric Association *Inversus Veritas*, and a firm called *Kristines Svecas Ltd*. This is a bigger business (Lursoft rating is 3.5), even if the number of employees is also just one person and the core capital in 2012 was same 10 Lats as in the *Rumpumpele* case. The tax payments into state budget were 2 430 Euros in 2015 and 3 430 Euros in 2016. As of 26.01.2018, the firm owes 6977.71 Euros in tax payments. Mairis Virsis, a clairvoyant and healer, is the major figure of the entangled network behind *Amadeus Maleficus* signboard. Virsis offers a wide range of services and his home page ([www.mairis-virsis.lv](http://www.mairis-virsis.lv)) includes a pricelist. Thus, up to 1-hour long healing session costs 45 Euros, a Tarot reading – 43 Euros, energy cleanse of a living space, solutions of family problems, attraction of good luck with magic runes and appropriate rituals – 59 Euros. An individually tailored charm pendant costs 75 Euros but magical charging of water, sugar or salt - 20 Euros.

These two examples were selected as they are not part of the supernatural service industry in metaphorical sense only. They actually sell something, either commodities or services, for a defined price.

### **Research methodology**

Since the primary focus of this study is on the public supply of spiritual goods and services, only publicly available and distributed data are used, combined with focused ethnography (brief field visits). The publicity of major agents' opinions is also important because it contributes to the social construction of the spiritual milieu itself. The applied research method is thematic document analyses and the general approach is phenomenological.

### **Research results and discussion**

Both Anita Povecerovska and Mairis Virsis deny the common discrimination of white and black magic. In their opinion, it is the intent that really matters. There exists an array of practices and magical skills that could be used either for a benevolent or malicious purpose. The witch school includes one class where the mechanics of so called "black magic" is explained (Berzina, 2016b).

Povecerovska and Virsis express some longing for the times when all kinds of magic and divination were widespread and socially more acceptable. They emphasize that it is normal to work as a magic specialist or use one's services. Asked about the possible harm arising from often visits to a sorcerer or healer, Virsis refers to the tradition: "Harm comes from not going to such people. Diviners are as ancient as humanity itself – once every hamlet had one, and people went to them in order to find clear mind, peace and health. Nothing has changed, a human being needs help and I can provide it" (*nra.lv*, 04.06.2015).

Povecerovska says that every woman is quintessentially a witch and each man is a wizard. She disagrees that exceptional gifts are necessary to practice magic. Any person possesses magical skills, they just need to be developed and cultivated. "A witch is a wise, sensible woman who [...] carries a huge amount of knowledge [...]. She is the woman who knows everything! People came and still come to witches in all kinds of life situations, since birth to the end of their days. A witch understands both the material world and cosmic laws, and can show the path through harsh

situations in life and lead along ups and downs in someone's life" (Berzina, 2016b,146). Virsis tells that the individual himself is the source of all good and evil and "the main thing is to be in harmony with oneself, with the is real meaning of life, and that is always simple and clear. The positive essence in a human being is the matter of personal choice" (Berzina, 2016a,149).

Sorcery is also understood as a self-help technique. This applies both to self-reflexion, and seeing to one's mundane needs and good relationships. Povecerovska points out that many rituals have psychotherapeutic effect. "They help an individual to understand one's own personality, to get rid of fears and despondency" (Berzina, 2016b,146). Individual's magical practices (or consulting a specialist of magic) thus help to build a supportive and protective environment, instrumental for one's wellbeing.

Virsis's wife describes him as a regular churchgoer and a true believer (Berzina 2016a,149). Another publicly well-known collaborator at *Amadeus Maleficium* – Erickson therapy practitioner Anna Krimele (Lieckalnina) has a Master's Degree in theology from the University of Latvia. The fact that *Amadeus Maleficium* rents its premises from the Latvian Academy of Sciences is helpful in the building of the centre's credibility – in the media, Krimele and Virsis are sometimes described as working "at the Academy of Sciences" (rather than in the building). By renting the office space, *Amadeus Maleficium* has rented also a segment of Academy's symbolic capital and the location in itself could be interpreted as an endorsement of the services offered there. The Academy of Sciences has never issued any official position statement on the matter.



Fig.2. **Amadeus Maleficium window at the Academy of Sciences building (author's photo, October 2017)**

*Rumpumpele* is located in a spacious (by Latvian standards) converted flat of an ordinary but well-kept apartment building on the upscale Baznīcas Street in the very centre of the city of Riga. It rings respectability. The most famous Latvian diviner of all times, Eizens Finks (1885-1958), practiced his trade successfully in a modest building located in the shabby off-centre *Moskauer Vorstadt* of Riga. This is not the case anymore (even if some fortune tellers and healers still see their clients at home which may be located in any neighbourhood). In order to be perceived as

credible and reputable, any service needs respectably looking premises, a website and some marketing strategy. "Invisible religion" has become very visible nowadays.

The theme of "return of religion" to the public space is causing a lot of attention in sociology of religion (see Hjelm, 2015). God may be "back", and so are the gods, spirits and magic (polytheistic and pagan religions, and alternative spirituality are enjoying same or close levels of public attention as monotheistic religions and their institutions). The spiritual service providers usually emphasize their modern side, diverse skills and the ability to cater to any need of their contemporaries. In a paid interview, Virsis is introduced as "[...] a contemporary *magus*, clairvoyant and healer, who can understand an eighty year old lady, a businessman who turns over millions, a drunk loser, and a depressed teenager[...] He can heal cancer, free from addictions, turn the money wheel and attract luck" (Berziņa, 2016a,149).

*Rumpupele's* claims are somewhat more modest. Their emphasis is more on personal growth and empowerment rather than cures for specific illnesses or achievement of ambitious goals. The services offered are presented as reliable through reference to tradition, their magic has supposedly stood through the test of time. Thus, any investment – taking a course at the centre or using a specific service is to be considered low-risk. People have done this for centuries – this is the message. Spiritual self-development is seen as a major value in the uncertain world. Once obtained, spiritual security can not be taken away. The involvement of the clients with the spiritual service providers does not necessarily imply deep and stable beliefs in the sacred or supernatural; in fact, direct reference to the sacred is often missing. Rather, this belongs to the realm of lived spirituality, more immanent than transcendent. Contemporary magic specialists seldom (if at all) share their reflections on deep existential issues and maybe their clients would not be interested if they did. Claims to philosophical depth are found in a different segment of the esoteric market – its "high end", with the spiritual gurus who write books and participate in media discussions on the cutting-edge of the time.

The magic specialists discussed here deal with practical, mundane but emotionally significant issues of their clients' lives – sickness and substance addiction, monetary worries and financial security (or sometimes also coveted financial gain), family life, career choices. The "grey" spiritual market sells basic and not luxury items.

## Conclusions

- 1) After the restoration of independence, Latvia has experienced not just political and economic changes but also significant diversification of its religious field, part of which is covered by spiritual developments that are not recognized as religious in the strict meaning of the word.
- 2) Spiritual marketplace includes also a share of "grey" market that is regulated by legislation other than concerning religion.
- 3) A number of spiritual service providers can be identified, of which this paper discussed two representatives.
- 4) Healing of common and life threatening diseases, addictions, help in family matters and business, divination in many forms, as well as magical education are common services offered by spiritual market service providers.
- 5) The discourse generally focuses on self- spirituality and empowerment where the client is perceived as a collaborator of the provider rather than passive recipient of the service.

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