

De-Toxing the Nation. Icon Worship – A Sobering Experience?

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In June 2001 the Russian tabloid newspaper, Megapolis-Express, reported that the country's famous magician, Iurii Longo, had performed a new "miracle:" he had turned a glass of water into vodka. "Why?!?", exclaims the magician, when asked what gave him the idea. "Very rarely do I meet people - and believe me, I travel a lot - who fail to ask me when magic is finally going to reveal the secret of turning water into vodka" [Megapolis-express 2001]. Longo is still in the process of perfecting his skills; meantime, people are eagerly awaiting the day.

For centuries alcohol has been as much part of Russian cultural history and folklore as icon worship, miracles, and sorcery. An entertaining connection to Longo's task for the future can be found in the past, when in pre-Revolutionary Russia "sorcerers were commonly paid in wine or vodka" [Ivanits 1992:118]. In the light of this and factors such as the traditional association between traditional festivals and alcohol consumption, the Orthodox Church was firm in its condemnation of the sin of drunkenness, and to this day defines alcohol as the devil's brew. The aim of this paper is to examine the processes of continuity and change in Russian culture (revival and survival) with reference to one of the ways in which alcoholism is purportedly overcome in Russia today, namely by veneration of a particular icon, which, it is claimed, since 1878 has been helping many Russians to rid themselves of the evil that possesses them. I shall not dwell on statistics, nor discuss the problem of alcoholism as such. Suffice to say that, according to a Reuters' news report in May 2001, two thirds of Russian men die from alcohol abuse. A three-year study conducted in Moscow and Udmurtia revealed that heart disease, accidents and suicides account for nearly 75% of all male deaths, most of them alcohol induced. "Men are seldom sober when they die" [<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/russia000519.html>].(1)

Yet drink as a central part of the male cultural environment in Russia is not a recent phenomenon. Throughout history, the Russian male identity, cultural and national, has been linked to alcohol consumption. Drinking seems always to have comprised an essential part of men's culture, and often acts as an assertion of their identity. Thus, the heroes (*bogatyry*) of the folk epic *byliny* embody men with a prodigious capacity for alcohol. Alcohol has also always occupied a central role in male bonding ceremonies; it has afforded men the necessary moral and physical boost in warfare and is invariably part of the consolidation process of patron-client relationships, as a rule a very male environment.(2)

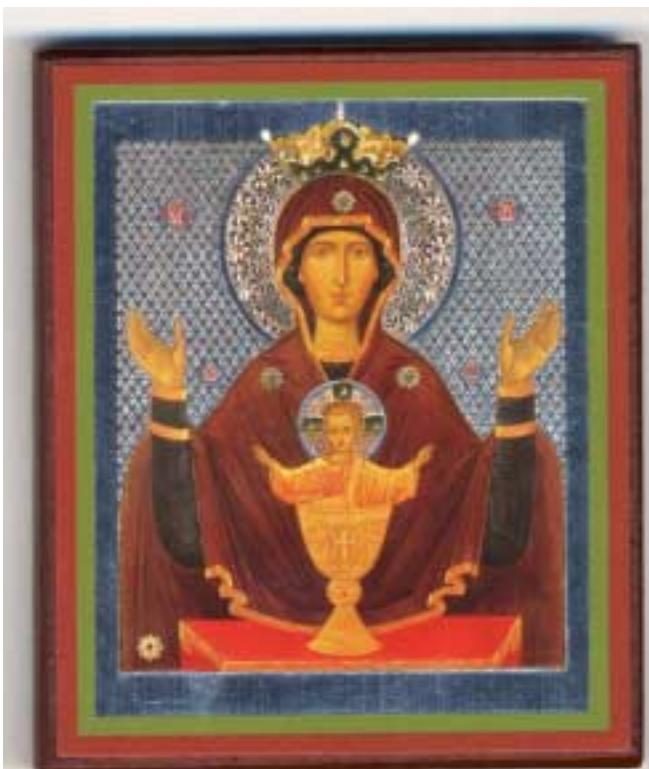
It was not untypical in Russia for favors to be performed and help offered quickly, if alcohol was offered as a reward. Thus Dostoevskii recounts in his Diary of a Writer (*Dnevnik pisatelia*) the story of a fire wreaking havoc in a village. As the flames threatened to destroy the church, the villagers hurried to its rescue. However, their attention was soon directed away from the house of God to the local inn: the innkeeper had appeared on the scene to plead with the volunteers that, if they saved his pot-house instead of the church, "he

would give them a barrel of liquor. The church burned down, but the pot-house was saved” [Dostoevskii 1873-81:187]. There are numerous tales and fabulates based round vodka: for example, recounting how the devil was the first to set up a distillery, how he taught the peasant to make spirits and how as a result of demonic assistance, the peasant opened a tavern and got rich [Ivanits 1992:42]. Thus, Dostoevskii’s Diary entry, in effect, describes a double-victory for the devil: the church burnt down after being ignored in favour of the pot-house, or rather the liquid he allegedly invented, which provided the *raison d’être* for the establishment of taverns in the first place. The consumption of alcohol, however, by no means excluded the priesthood. Male members of the peasant *mir* regarded the invitation of the village priest as central, especially on the occasion of major holy days, particularly Easter. The priest was to make the rounds and join every villager for food and, more importantly, drink (by definition alcoholic). A peasant would take mortal offence if a cleric rejected his hospitality. Rejection was rare, however, as invariably the priest’s livelihood would depend on his participation in such rituals. That said, the poverty-stricken village priest as, for example, described by Donald W. Treadgold, was often “notorious for drunkenness and loose living” in any case [Treadgold 1968:100-01].

During the Soviet period, at least in the city, alcohol consumption especially abuse of and addiction to alcohol, joined criminality, prostitution and suicide as one of four behavioral patterns regarded as deviant. Yet while alcoholism was perceived as a negative characteristic of general human values, alcohol commonly played, and continues to play, a part in the rites and rituals of everyday life, whether secular (e.g. birthdays, a new job or remembrance days) or religious (e.g. communion or the end of a fast). Up until the 1980s, Soviet historians regularly attributed the above-mentioned “anomalies” to the survival of capitalism in people’s consciousness [Lebina 1999:19-20]. Equally, it could be argued that in post-Soviet Russia, too, capitalism might be blamed for the continuing existence of criminality, prostitution, alcoholism and suicide. In the case of the first three they are mainly forms of survival, in the case of the latter often an act of desperation at the inability to find a way in which to survive. Yet alcohol has also always been a marker of (Russian) national identity, and the Soviet authorities had also to contend with a deep rooted cultural attachment to drink, reflected in sources as early as the Tale of Bygone Years (*Povest’ vremennykh let*), s. a. 986, a written account of an oral legend, telling how Vladimir I rejected the Muslim religion because it would not allow the Rus’ to drink: “drinking is the joy of the Russes. We cannot exist without that pleasure” [Cross, Sherbowitz-Westor 1973:97].(3)

The veneration of the icon in question here, the “Mother of God the Never-Draining Cup,” commenced in 1878, when a peasant and retired soldier of the Tula region, who had fallen victim to the bottle, was drinking himself into poverty (losing his entire pension to the devilish liquid) and physical ruin (his legs had become paralysed). One night he dreamt of a monk, who told him to go to the monastery of Our Lady in Serpukhov, for there was the icon of the “Mother of God the Never-Draining Cup” (*Неупиваемая чаша*). It was before this icon that the monk asked him to pray in order to regain his physical and mental health. The retired soldier, however, preferred to carry on drinking than crawl all the way to venerate the icon. In classic folk narrative manner, the dream repeated itself a second and third time, until the monk, now issuing stern commands, put the fear of God into him sufficiently for him to decide to make his way to the monastery, though he had to travel on

all fours. As he approached his destination he began to feel better, and even managed to walk the last part of his journey, supported by a walking stick. Upon arrival at the monastery, he told the monks of his visions and asked to see the icon of the “Never-Draining Cup.” No one had heard of such an icon, until someone wondered whether it was not the image hanging in the stairwell between the church and the vestry. And, indeed, that is where the icon was found. It was taken into the church, prayers were said and the retired soldier healed. Word spread fast, so that soon people from all over Russia were making their way to the miracle-working icon to pray, be it for themselves, their fathers, husbands or sons.(4)



The icon of the Mother of God the Never-Draining Cup

During the Soviet period the monastery was closed and the church housing the miracle-working icon demolished. Only one church in the whole province remained open. It was to this place that the “Never-Draining Cup” was moved, but pilgrims were few and far between until the 1980s, when their number began to rise steadily. The monastery in Serpukhov was re-opened in 1990, and ever since has been inundated with streams of people, eager to express their desperation before the Mother of mothers, in the hope of intercession and a miraculous cure.

It is of interest that a large percentage of miracle-working icons in Russia are images of the Mother of God. Indeed, Fedotov, in his description and analysis of the *dukhovnye stikhi* (spiritual verses), asserts that “all of humanity’s anguish, all tenderness before divinity, which people dare not express before

Christ for fear of God, they will pour out freely and lovingly to the Mother of God” [Fedotov 1991:49].(5) One may thus choose to argue the case of the psychoanalyst, who would relay to us the concept of the “inner mother,” a residue of early mother-child interaction, which according to one commentator exists “within the normal adult psyche of the Orthodox venerator of the Mother of God” [Rancour-Lafferriere 2001:11]. The helpless and despairing child turns to the mother, in this case the Mother of God, asking for assistance and willingly letting him or herself be helped. Whatever the reason, religious legends, popular miracle accounts and, in particular, the hugely popular Dream of the Mother of God (*Son Bogoroditsy*) and Pilgrimage of the Mother of God among the Torments (*Khozhdenie Borogroditsy po mukam*) all testify to her importance as caring intercessor for those in need.

Vera Shevzov notes that veneration of miracle-working icons has often “crossed both gender and socio-economic lines” [Shevzov 1999:27]. What we see here, however, especially in terms of gender, is that worship

is perhaps better described as gender focussed than crossing the line. Thus, although the person through whom the icon in question was “discovered” was a man, it is safe to say that a large number of those making their journey to the monastery in Serpukhov are women. While the accompanying video, produced by the Russian Orthodox Church, depicts street life in Russia in which the “alcoholics” shown are all men, the majority of worshippers at the monastery’s church are women: women, who pray for their sons, brothers, husbands and fathers. This also finds confirmation in Church-published literature on the matter, which shows that the majority of the stories of salvation (often of husbands and sons) are told by women. Furthermore, some writing is even explicitly aimed at women attempting to save their loved ones. A leaflet about alcoholism obtained at the monastery reads: “What are we to do if the alcoholic won’t pray? In this case it is necessary for others to pray for him: his mother, wife or children” [“O P’ianstve” 2000]. Equally, a booklet entitled How to Help Those Suffering from Alcoholism and Drug Addiction is subtitled Spiritual Advice and Prayers for Mothers, Wives and Children.

Accounts of people being cured of the evils of alcoholism through prayer before the “Never-Draining Cup” are widely available, be they in the form of little booklets, video or CD ROM, all on sale at the monastery, as well as at the numerous church stalls on Russia’s streets and in churches. Talking about “revelatory” experiences has always been important in the history of the Orthodox Church and its icons, and consequently, therefore, among its flock. Miracles were never regarded as private affairs, but as something of direct relevance to believers generally. However, while in the past it was believed that the “concealment of something sacred lays a mortal sin on the soul” [Shevzov 1999:30], I suspect that today’s appeal by the priests to people to recount their stories may also have something to do with providing the Church with useful material for advertising its services. Naturally, the Church is interested in saving as many souls as possible. But at a time when the Russian Orthodox Church is still rebuilding itself and has many competitors, whether other confessions, sects or mere faith-healers, hope and help that can be provided through the testimony of ordinary believers about miracle-working icons can offer valuable assistance in the struggle for souls.

That said, miracle-working icons are deeply rooted in both official and popular Orthodoxy, Orthodox theological, liturgical and devotional heritage. And, as in the past, people today are being woven into the narrative that makes an icon special. Their individual sins, in this case alcoholism, bring them together. Thus what the icon might “do” for the individual could somehow be linked to the fate of the Russian people as a whole. The nation becomes an imagined community, alcoholism the common denominator: individual tragedies suffered by many. And while the rituals of daily life see many united by, for want of a better word, the “common enemy” (the demon drink) the miracle-working icon sees them united in the face of it (the Mother of God). Small copies of the icon, as we are told by one of the monks on the video about the monastery and its miracle-working icon, have become features in most households, since almost every family contains at least one member who drinks [Neupivaemaia chasha 1998].

As already mentioned above, large numbers of Russians are killed or their health and lives seriously harmed by what is, paradoxically, the nation’s favourite pastime. Indeed, alcoholism has become a major

contributor to the country's demographic crisis [Moscow Times, 01/22/2001:8].(10) Eternal torment in the afterlife, something that has permeated popular Orthodoxy, past and present, and is reflected both in folk religious legends (*legendy*),(11) as well as the literature disseminated by the Church today, does not appear, however, to act as a deterrent, let alone help root out the problem.

What we observe in contemporary Russia is that, while alcoholism is widespread and the admission of "being Orthodox" an even commoner feature of life, churches are still largely empty. How then can we explain the long queues in front of miracle-working icons and shrines? As already mentioned, life after Communism brought with itself many uncertainties and lack of guidance. This, coupled with the revival of old traditions such as the veneration of miracle-working icons, explains well enough the increasingly large numbers of pilgrims and miracle-seekers. One gets the sense that the majority of those in the queues, however, have little knowledge of Orthodox theology and liturgy, and give the impression of an occult-consuming mass, awaiting miracles as if by magic [see also Liubomudrov 2000:45]. In this they are conforming to the popular tradition of folk healing via magic charms (*zagovory*), which in many instances were given a prayer-like format and also appealed to the Mother of God (see below). What the Church might like to see, namely the conversion or return to Orthodoxy of the Russian people, uniting them into a body of the faithful, can so far be observed only on a very superficial level. Often the veneration of an icon or shrine takes on the characteristics of a mass cult: people flocking to church in the hope of a miracle, and not, as would be expected of Orthodox Christians, for a blessing and the forgiveness of sins. Indeed, this mass appeal of miracles is not only rooted in Russia's traditions but has been described to me as "Orthodox magic" (*pravoslavnyi magizm*), denoting the way in which contemporary Orthodoxy is approached and "consumed" by the majority of Russians today.(8)

The church at the monastery, housing the image of the "Never-Draining Cup," is busy all year round, especially on Sundays, and almost inaccessible thanks to the many hundreds, if not thousands, of pilgrims on 18th May, the icon's feast-day. Many of those healed, having received hope and the possibility of a new start, in gratitude leave behind pieces of jewellery, some of which are displayed in front of the icon.(9) Father Kirill, the superior at the monastery, told me that they have already received so much jewellery that "you wouldn't be able to see the icon if we hung it all in front of it. We could fill whole corridors with all those golden gifts." He refrained, however, from commenting on what happens to the trinkets, if they are not gracing the icon, nor, indeed, the monastery's corridors. Here, as at so many other moments in contemporary Orthodox practice, we are witnessing a new and evolving popular religious tradition. The pragmatism that underlines past and present popular Orthodoxy is strongly linked to the survival of traditional rituals and the customary belief in miracles (and more specifically, the solution to problems resulting from them). The more theoretical, canonical aspects of Orthodoxy do not attract many ordinary people in Russia today [cf. Fedotov 1991:92].

An altogether different mass-cultural aspect of miracles is that they make for very attractive features in newspapers. It should be no surprise that the tabloids are quick to report on "intriguing" miraculous events. Thus the "Never-Draining Cup" found its way into the papers in March 2001, for example, when we read in the newspaper Chas Pik (Rush Hour) that an alcoholic prayed before a copy of the icon (at home) and coughed up a

little devil (mixed in with his usual portion of phlegm). The creature measured about two centimetres, and resembled a slimy grey worm with two small horns attached to a minuscule head. Events unfurled as follows: the alcoholic's wife put the creature into a bottle containing home-made wine (!), and then his mother, who had brought back a copy of the icon of the "Never-Draining Cup" from her previous visit to Serpukhov, decided to take the creature in the bottle to the monks. The bottle remained at the monastery, as a result of which many of the monks fell ill and became depressed. Time passed, and the alcohol evaporated. And so, after a while, now that the wine in the bottle had vanished, the monks decided to pour vodka into it (no reason for this is given in the article), but the smell from the bottle was so gross that they opted for a scientific approach. The scientist consulted, however, had never come across anything like it, while those within the Department of Military Mutation claimed that the worm was just a simple parasite. Not satisfied with this statement, the scientist they had approached initially decided to take on the case himself, but fell ill and died. His colleague, continuing his work after his untimely demise, also fell ill. The monks agreed to take back the bottle and burn the devilish creature. The drunk has not touched alcohol since, and has become a very pious man ["P'ianitsa pomolilsia" 2001].(10) The old Russian proverb "to drink wine is to put oneself in the hands of the devil" (*vina napit'sia – besu predat'sia*) [Vlasova 1998:41] serves as a poignant accompaniment to the story, for not only would it prove its point literally, but it would equally support the Church's argument that alcohol is a "devilish liquid."

Three things are noteworthy: the structure of the narrative, for one, suggests an oral legend (*legenda*), recorded by the journalist. It ought to be borne in mind, however, that the article was published in a secular tabloid typical of post-Soviet Russia. Yet the fact that such papers report instances of this kind at all appears to reflect not merely the obvious sensationalist stance that papers of this kind adopt on the supernatural, but also the conviction that such stories will appeal to the readership because of their miraculous subject and "unbelievable" outcome. Besides, the contents refer to the longstanding Russian Orthodox preoccupation, at both official and popular level, with the devil and with exorcism [Ivanits 1989:38-50, 84 ff.]. Slightly incongruous, however, is the "scientific approach" taken by the monks, undone only by their decision in the end to take the bottled creature back to the monastery and burn it. Second, and convenient for the Church, is the implication of the clear inadequacy of modern science to deal with the supernatural, which, it is suggested, obviously exists, but no laboratory is able to solve the puzzle behind it. The third aspect of the story worth mentioning refers back to the gender focus; the alcoholic here has three female characters at hand to help: the Mother of God, his wife and his mother.

The concluding sentence of the leader in Moskovskii Komsomolets of 18 June 2001 on alcoholism in Serpukhov and the icon of the "Never-Draining Cup" appears to underline the mass or everyday, rather than the religious, aspect of the veneration of the icon. Here we read, that "just as in his time the smith Vakula went to the Empress to ask for a pair of boots for his Oksana, today people from all over Great Russia are drawn to the miracle-working icon ["Sviatykh – zanosi!" 2001]. It is curious to see the cure of a debilitating disease (if alcoholism, at least by those affected by it, is in any way recognised as such) set on a par with the magic receipt of a pair of boots, as described in Gogol's story "Christmas Eve" (*Noch' pered Rozhdestvom*). What this

sentence underlines, however, is the general perception that people flock to the icon in order to receive something (healing), for a miracle. Gogol's story is frankly about magic, while miracle-working icons, at least in the eyes of the Church, are not. Yet, for the majority of those who flock to venerate the icon, the magic aspect so characteristic of popular Orthodoxy prevails. Besides, this article was published in the second most popular Russian daily (tabloid), and thus will have reached a wide readership. Vakula's gift to Oksana will not only be known to many of its members, but in addition to equating religious miracles with magic, creates an air of familiarity, which perhaps facilitates identification with and understanding of the miraculous at work here. It is to be assumed that the report is written in all seriousness. Far be it from me to believe that the author wrote this with tongue in cheek. If they did, however, it is still likely that a reasonably large number of readers would not have noticed, while those who were sceptical would laugh at the story in any case.(11)

Not only the subject of newspaper articles, the icon itself is also used in the advertisements of faith-healers proclaiming to rid people of the evils of alcoholism. Those offering their services, invariably women going by the title of "Orthodox healer" or "Orthodox woman" (*pravoslavnaya istselitel'nitsa/baba*), are usually depicted next to the text listing their abilities and boasting about their rate of success, dressed in Orthodox fashion, a head-scarf covering their head, and holding candle and cross, while the icon of the Never-Draining Cup stands on a table in front of them. They thus uphold a long-standing custom of their trade, for historically magic healers in Russia would, "along with herbs and grasses [make] use of the cross, holy water, incense, and church candles" [Ivanits 1992:114]. The accompanying charm was called "prayer," and quite frequently was directed at the Mother of God [Ivanits 1992:115]. While alcoholics are reported to have been "cured" by people ordering prayers on their behalf at the monastery, the tradition of healing by magic, if advertising is anything to go by, continues to this day; and the advancement of technology has allowed contemporary faith-healers to offer healing without the subject being present by magical prayers performed over their photographs. Needless to say, the Church disapproves of these "magicians, psychics, psychotherapists or faith-healers (many of whom are charlatans)," who in fact are servants of the devil. This "being possessed by evil devilish spirit," just like mere medical (i.e. physical) treatment of alcoholism, according to the Church, means that the sufferer remains a slave to his addiction, his soul far from free and his spirit far from pure. Such spiritual purity and independence can only be achieved through a belief in God and a life with Him [Akafist 2000:20].

Can it then be argued that the Church is de-toxing the nation with the support of the miracle-working icon? The popularity of the veneration of the icon of the Mother of God the Never-Draining Cup and the widespread belief in, and accounts of the icon's healing powers reflects a tradition revived, continued and evolving. Official and popular Orthodoxy meet here and provide the context within which two key moments in contemporary Russia are played out: the struggle with, and desperate search for a solution to the problem of alcoholism and the problem of reviving the country's traditional religion. Orthodoxy is struggling in a competitive role in the post-Soviet spiritual marketplace, symbolized by the cult revolving around the icon. The few statistics mentioned above testify to the seriousness of Russia's drink problem. This goes hand in hand with the central role alcohol consumption has played in Russia's history, a habit that, like the seemingly magic

subtext of icon-worship, appears embedded in the Russians' sense of identity and understanding of their culture. It appears that the solution to the problem of alcoholism is not just purveyed by the Church, but also by its so-called "heretic rivals," such as faith healers, equally part of Russian tradition. While the Church agrees that the medical profession has some stake in the matter, they nonetheless believe that alcoholism is a spiritual illness, and curing your body but not your soul will have you falling for the bottle over and over again [Neupivaemaia chasha 1998].

For some icon worship has undoubtedly been a sobering experience. However, to conquer the problem of alcoholism on a national scale with the help of the Never-Draining Cup, must surely be wishful thinking. The Church may deem the Never-Draining Cup a tool for curing the nation, yet the World Health Organization regards alcoholism as a national disease, one in need of medical attention from the point of view of the medical profession.

Alcoholism and icon-worship are not merely intrinsic parts of Russian culture, but, in present-day Russia, a society whose life is dominated by uncertainty and lack of guidance, both are inevitable signs of the times. And both, in their own ways, may thus be interpreted as comfort-inducing mechanisms to help cope with the hardship of everyday life. While drinking may not be followed by a sobering experience, icon worship, if not sobering, is at least a traditional comforting experience, a means of taking control of one's life by way of handing it over into the hands of God, or at least those of His Mother.

NOTES

- 1 This report, incidentally, was lifted straight onto the angelfire web-page, where it was presented as evangelising Christians out to rescue the Russian people from their spiritual decline [www.angelfire.com/oh2/raicc/].
- 2 A fitting, and perhaps somewhat ironic, example here is the Head of Sofrino, Russia's most prolific producer of religious artefacts and churchware, who, I was told, has his own brand of vodka: the bottles are labelled with his portrait, to be seen and devoured only by his most esteemed clients.
- 3 This also underlines the post-Soviet equation of "being Orthodox" with "being Russian," in which drink is a historic feature of national character and reason for choosing Orthodoxy over Islam on the grounds of the latter's prohibition against drinking: "liking a drink is part of being Russian, which in turn is part of being Orthodox."
- 4 This is the story as it is related in all the pamphlets about the icon, as well as on the accompanying video [Neupivaemaia chasha 1998] and CD ROM [Vysotskii obitel' 2000].
- 5 Translation my own.
- 6 An editorial article. According to another article in the February/March issue of Novaia Gazeta in 2001, during the mid-nineties Russia lost up to 43,000 of its citizens to fake vodka. It asks by how much this number would have to be multiplied in order to reach the real total of alcohol-related

- deaths. By the end of the nineties, when “honest” alcohol production had climbed its way up to 54.6% of the market, the number of those dying of drink had declined, only to rise again.
- Consequently, in 2001, for example, it eliminated a number equivalent to the inhabitants of an average town.
- 7 As, for example, in the well-known folk legend about the drunkard condemned to act as the devil’s dray-horse in Hell.
- 8 Interview with Fr. Georgii (Chistiakov), Moscow, 2001.
- 9 My guess, though I have not been able to confirm this, is that most of the jewellery comprises gifts given by grateful women, i.e. those thankful that their prayers have been heard.
- 10 Less sensational, yet somewhat similar in content, is the account of one woman on the video [Neupivaemaia chasha 1998]. Not only are we told about her success in overcoming her drinking problem, but are also enlightened about the way in which she came to give up smoking. One day she went to church ... Her happiness about her newly found trust in God made her want to sing along with the choir. But all she managed to produce was a very coarse sound, before she began to cough. And out she spat a little black worm, the creature evidently representing the last remaining devil residing within her, the one that had tempted her to smoke. She has not touched a cigarette since.
- 11 This newspaper is, however, less likely to be read by well-educated sections of the population.

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