

# Legitimizing New Religiosity in Contemporary Russia

## “Vedic Wisdom” Under Fire

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**ABSTRACT:** Attitudes toward alternative spirituality in Russia are shaped by legislative limitations on religious freedom, the state’s traditionalism, and Russian Orthodox anticultism. Nevertheless, public personalities associated with new religious movements persist and flourish. Oleg Torsunov, popularizer of Vedic Psychology and holistic medicine, is a striking example. Despite ongoing controversies about his religious affiliation, medical claims, and gender ideology, Torsunov continues to attract followers. This article examines why public figures such as Torsunov seem unsinkable in hostile cultural environments. Mapping the heated discursive landscape surrounding Torsunov, I argue that the secret to this resilience is a “legitimation lattice”—the strategy of grounding one’s authority in several sources of legitimacy. Torsunov’s lattice is composed of different interlocked strips: science, Indian spirituality, personal charisma, and common stereotypes. This structure increases the resilience of controversial public figures in two ways: by making their legitimation strategies flexible and by allowing them to emphasize mainstream values as needed.

**KEYWORDS:** legitimation, gender, Russia, Eastern Europe, new religious movements, New Age, International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), Krishna, Vedic Wisdom

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In the 2010s, at the height of his popularity, the Russian lifestyle guru Oleg Torsunov (b. 1965), alternative health practitioner, femininity expert, and purveyor of “Vedic Wisdom,” found himself in trouble with an unusually diverse cast of critics. The task of debunking his claims and exposing his errors was taken up by the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian followers of Hindu spirituality, feminist bloggers, psychologists, disappointed patients, interested observers, and the National Council of the Center of Krishna Consciousness Societies in Russia. Besieged from all sides of the ideological spectrum, this prolific man is a fascinating example of a contemporary spiritual celebrity, at once representative and unique. Torsunov’s persistent, if troubled, public presence usefully complicates our vision of the contemporary landscape of spirituality in Russia. His resilience points to a broader question: how do controversial public figures preserve their appeal, even as their authority claims are consistently delegitimized by outsiders?

Having positioned himself as an expert in Vedic spiritual knowledge, Torsunov seeks to translate this knowledge into Russian realities. Crossing boundaries between religion, New Age spirituality, and popular psychology, his teachings on personal improvement reference the broad Indian tradition, draw on Krishna Consciousness doctrine, and echo American self-help bestsellers, such as John Gray’s *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992). Torsunov’s medical practice ranges from popular advice on holistic living to eccentric methods of healing with stones and tree bark. His nontraditional sources should have made him suspect in the contemporary Russian political climate. Instead, his practice has flourished, becoming at once more controversial, attracting scrutiny and criticism from a variety of interested actors, and more mainstream, with thousands of online followers and positive media exposure.

Torsunov began his practice in the 1990s in a country transformed by the recent transition from the highly secular, often pro-atheist Soviet state to a space of unprecedented religious freedom, where domestic and foreign spiritual movements flourished. However, by the 2000s, the state introduced new legislation that marginalized “nontraditional” religions, distinguished by their recent arrival or relatively minor cultural significance in Russia.<sup>1</sup> The image of a newly traditionalist Russia, hostile to all forms of dissent, has dominated both national and international media.<sup>2</sup> Though based in legal and sociological reality, this image begs for nuance because alternative spirituality in Russia continues to flourish. This persistence is particularly striking in the case of spiritual celebrities.

As a particularly adaptable post-Soviet spiritual leader, Torsunov is an example of the paradoxical resilience of alternative spirituality in the Russian public space that is ostensibly dominated by traditional religions with a long historical presence on the territory of Russia, such as Russian

Orthodox Christianity or Islam. Based on my analysis of Torsunov's writings, lectures, and promotional materials (2003–2018),<sup>3</sup> and discussions of his work on Russian websites, forums, social networks, and in the media, I map the heated discursive landscape surrounding his public presence and activity. This article is also informed by my ethnographic research into discourses of Vedic Wisdom in contemporary Russian New Age and interviews with Vedic Femininity followers.<sup>4</sup> Building on James R. Lewis' argument that legitimation in religious movements involves flexible and contextual strategies,<sup>5</sup> I show that Torsunov's approach to grounding his authority can be spatially represented as a lattice. While a physical lattice is made of crossed strips, a "legitimation lattice" lends its structural soundness from diverse sources of authority, which allows controversial public figures to adjust their rhetoric to make teachings appealing and convincing.

The lattice approach to legitimation has a downside: it exposes its user to criticism on different fronts. The whirlpools of controversy around Torsunov exemplify this process. Torsunov's critics problematize his religious affiliation, scientific soundness, faithfulness to Krishna, and approach to gender. Though the accusations are grave and the debunking campaigns thorough, none have decisively delegitimized Torsunov. Nevertheless, the debates facilitate vernacular theorizing about important social and existential problems: the psychological import of spirituality, the boundaries of science, the post-Soviet religious landscape, the usefulness of self-help, and the meaning of gender.

The legitimation lattice strategy has two major implications for the problem of the resilience of controversial spiritual figures and other kinds of opinion leaders. First, their success depends on their ability to move between legitimation sources, adjusting their level of reliance on any single one. Second, flourishing in inhospitable environments requires spiritual leaders to disavow radical potential and emphasize values that are more in line with the mainstream: in the case of Torsunov, conspiratorial thinking<sup>6</sup> and traditional gender roles.<sup>7</sup> This model of legitimation thus helps explain why controversial celebrity experts persist in the post-Soviet religious landscape, as well as in the wider public space of the post-truth era.

## **NEW RELIGIOSITY IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA**

Despite the promotion of atheism in the late Soviet Union, there existed a complex "cultic milieu," a "cultural underground" of "deviant belief systems and their associated practices."<sup>8</sup> These beliefs and practices, though "deviant" from the state's perspective, were propagated by independent spiritual seekers who often negotiated official structures, rather than rejecting them. The state's suppression of metaphysics

fueled an underground esoteric effervescence, which included experimental science, underground art, urban mythology, psychic and paranormal phenomena, and other forms of spirituality.<sup>9</sup> New religious influences appeared from abroad. The International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), which arrived in the 1970s, was one of the most notable newcomers.

ISKCON's international history began in 1965, when A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977) traveled from India to the United States to preach devotion to Krishna.<sup>10</sup> As a branch of Vaishnavism, one of the largest denominations in Hinduism, ISKCON includes traditional Hindu worship practices: conducting rituals; chanting mantra; offering blessed food, or *prasadam*;<sup>11</sup> as well as serving free meals or selling books on city streets. Since it was new to the West and perceived as exotic, ISKCON is often cited as an example of a new religious movement. Starting with world-renouncing attempts to replicate a premodern social system in contemporary society, the American movement encountered anticultist attacks and institutional crises, eventually transitioning to a more “world-accommodating” orientation.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, the ISKCON community grew despite state persecution.<sup>13</sup> In post-Soviet Russia, it flourished in the open.

The post-Soviet transition was marked by legislative changes that enabled freedom of religion, and a subsequent upsurge in new religious movements and New Age practices and ideas: foreign and domestic, reinvigorated and innovative.<sup>14</sup> Charismatic personalities promoted secret doctrines, esoteric teachings, and alternative health practices. Celebrity psychics appeared on TV. Popular psychology books, both original and translated from English, became bestsellers, and a subculture of holistic living flourished, overlapping with attempts to reconstruct pre-Christian Slavic belief systems and back-to-the-land projects.<sup>15</sup> Scholars developed different frameworks to approach these new forms of spirituality. Alexander Panchenko suggested seeing them as “crisis cults”: like “cargo cults” that resulted from colonial encounters, new religions reflected profound cultural changes following the collapse of Soviet ideology.<sup>16</sup> Others saw Russia's religious effervescence as a symptom of Westernization or a reflection of personal spiritual searches.<sup>17</sup>

Post-Soviet religious freedom was eventually cut short. Drawing on Western anticult sources and led by Alexander Dvorkin (b. 1955), Orthodox activists argued that Russian citizens were in danger of being brainwashed by “totalitarian cults.”<sup>18</sup> Like the United States and Britain in the 1960s, post-Soviet Russian society responded to challenges posed by new religiosity with anxiety fueled by media sensationalism.<sup>19</sup> Though only a minority of new religious movements pose legitimate dangers, they are often unusual in the host culture and destabilize the status quo, which makes them easy scapegoats for fears of social change.<sup>20</sup> Orthodox interest groups received the support of the government,

seeking to regain control over the country's ideological crisis through managing religious expression.<sup>21</sup> In the first decades of the new century, Russian anticult discourse shifted focus from brainwashed individuals to the supposed political dangers of new religious movements. Legislative changes rearranged the post-Soviet religious free-for-all into a hierarchical space that privileged religions seen as traditional to Russia.<sup>22</sup> In this climate, newer forms of spirituality were rendered suspect. They did not, however, disappear.

Spiritual seeking continued in different forms—less spectacular, but not restricted to the private sphere or the underground. Torsunov's popularity is exemplary of this process. Despite being frequently challenged, his influence has continued to grow beyond the boundaries of his own spiritual home in ISKCON. What enables this counterintuitive flourishing of alternative spirituality and controversial authority in Russian public space?

### TORSUNOV AND HIS VEDIC WISDOM

In 1965, the year of Swami Prabhupada's arrival in America, one of his most idiosyncratic Russian followers was born across the ocean in Serov, a small town in the Ural Mountains. Growing up in a working class family during the culturally restrictive Era of Stagnation,<sup>23</sup> Torsunov nevertheless benefited from an active cultic milieu. As a teenager, he experimented with yoga and psychic perception.<sup>24</sup> After graduating from a medical college, he studied in the Samara Medical Institute, but was conscripted to serve as an army medical instructor after his second year. He returned to finish his dermatovenerology<sup>25</sup> degree in 1992, and pursued his spiritual search with renewed vigor. Four years later, he was initiated into the Krishna Consciousness tradition as Audarya Dhama Das.<sup>26</sup>

Torsunov's teaching is a version of ISKCON philosophy transformed by esoteric influences and popular psychology and complemented with a practice of alternative healing. In 2003, Torsunov positioned himself as "an expert in Ayurveda, dermatovenerology, needle therapy, acupuncture, acupressure, phytotherapy, reflexotherapy, lithotherapy, folk medicine," healing with *mudrās* (hand gestures) and *yantras* (graphic symbols).<sup>27</sup> Over time, references to *mudrās* and *yantras* were replaced with promises of diagnosis by photo and voice and healing with oils, tree bark, and corals. These layers of expertise created an impression of multi-faceted and readily adaptable authority.

At this point, Torsunov began his practice as an itinerant lecturer in and around Russia. In 2004, he opened Dr. Oleg Torsunov's Consulting Center of Vedic Culture in Riga, Latvia, advertised as a provider of generic spiritual aid: "Good advice is simple, clear and effective, and

most importantly—timely and affordable!”<sup>28</sup> Throughout the 2000s, Torsunov opened several short-lived consulting centers in Russia, United States, Germany, and Israel. In 2006, he opened the Moscow Consulting Center, which was renamed the Amrita Center and moved to Krasnodar, a city in southern Russia, six years later.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, Torsunov’s website expanded, engaging new audiences and volunteers, advertising new projects, and raising money for publications.<sup>30</sup>

Torsunov’s practice expanded into a small self-help empire. Even in the increasingly traditionalist political climate of the 2000s, when alternative spirituality practices began to attract negative attention,<sup>31</sup> his work was far from being repressed into silence. Known far beyond ISKCON as a lifestyle and psychology expert, Torsunov has published thirty-four books on subjects ranging from family relations to life after death, from business advice to flu remedies.<sup>32</sup> He has produced hundreds of lecture recordings, appeared on television and gained 360,000 followers on the Russian social network VK.com and 323,000 on YouTube.<sup>33</sup> The Torsunov.ru website, updated in 2017 with a flashy design, regularly published letters from readers: a woman suffering from shyness, a man struggling to manage his mind-reading abilities.<sup>34</sup> On Torsunov-online.ru, one could find dozens of courses on personal development, family life, health, weight loss, yoga, astrology, and spirituality.<sup>35</sup> The offshoot website VedaRadio.fm provided lectures and mantras.<sup>36</sup> Torsunov’s books can be purchased in mainstream bookstores as well as his online store Ecoveda.<sup>37</sup> Their popularity spurs offline involvement: the biannual festival *Blagost* (“Sattvam” or “Goodness”) and reader-led clubs in Russia and beyond.

Torsunov’s psychology teachings are widely known as Vedic Wisdom (*vedicheskaia mudrost’*). Within ISKCON, the term is understood both narrowly as a set of sacred writings and broadly as a philosophical and spiritual tradition grounded in these texts.<sup>38</sup> Prabhupada’s capacious conception of Vedic culture is consonant with the vague conception of Vedic Wisdom in Russia’s alternative spirituality circles today.<sup>39</sup> Drawing on this ambiguity, Torsunov liberally invokes Vedic Wisdom. He owes his fame, however, to one specific aspect of this discourse: Vedic Femininity.

Vedic Femininity is a framework for women’s self-development that focuses on cultivating qualities perceived as feminine: meekness, subservience, beauty, and wisdom. According to the teaching, women are naturally inclined to submit, while men are born leaders. Realizing one’s spiritual potential requires strict adherence to gendered behavior. These teachings reflect misogynist tendencies historically present in ISKCON,<sup>40</sup> but, more importantly, overlap with the social conservatism dominant in the Russian public sphere.

The rhetoric of family values was popularized by the state to address Russia’s demographic crisis and give ideological backing to the country’s

opposition to the West. In this context, the ISKCON vision of gender as interpreted by Torsunov fell on welcoming soil, and Vedic Femininity was taken up by other lecturers, bloggers, influencers, and fashion designers.<sup>41</sup> Spread through social networks, often without attribution, Torsunov's writings on Vedic family values gained media attention and entered the self-help sections of bookstores, alongside the books of his follower Olga Valyaeva (b. 1982), a Krishna devotee who promotes Vedic Femininity to an audience of young women. Other spiritual communities, especially Neopagan ones, were inspired to develop their own versions of Vedic Femininity.<sup>42</sup> The teaching's appeal secured its position alongside popular gendered self-help of writers such as John Gray (b. 1951), an American author whose bestselling books of relationship advice are very popular in Russia (1992, 2017).<sup>43</sup>

Torsunov's enterprising approach is not unusual. Marketing is an important component of religious life, and movements strategically use "faith brands"<sup>44</sup> and "devotional marketing"<sup>45</sup> to help potential members find and join them. ISKCON temples in particular have historically been supported through book sales, vegetarian restaurants, and devotee-owned businesses.<sup>46</sup> Torsunov, however, is less of an alms collector than an entrepreneurial founder of a movement—a prophet who makes a profit.<sup>47</sup> Even more precisely, he is a creator of a new product out of preexisting traditions, following a common strategy of New Age authors.<sup>48</sup> In addition to selling treatments and healing items, he promotes the Vedic Wisdom brand on the market of popular psychology, competing with other writers for sales of books, seminars, and event tickets. While a "faith brand" like ISKCON seeks to attract converts but maintain its boundaries, Torsunov's Vedic Wisdom exceeds these boundaries, gaining converts not to a faith but to a lifestyle. By shifting to the language of personal development and empowerment, Torsunov moves away from ISKCON's Krishna-centered discourse into the territory of the New Age and what Paul Heelas calls "self-religions."<sup>49</sup> This process is not straightforward. Combined with Torsunov's eclecticism, it makes his practice vulnerable to challenges from within and without the community of his followers. This approach to marketing renders Torsunov's Vedic Wisdom teaching culturally liminal. Prabhupada's teachings in New York already adapted the Hindu tradition for the international context, but Torsunov's practice takes this process further.

Western versions of non-Western forms of spirituality are not innocent borrowings but products of colonialist knowledge extraction.<sup>50</sup> New Age culture in particular domesticates such teachings by including them in the Western framework of popular psychology.<sup>51</sup> In the process, ideas and practices are decontextualized and hijacked by the ideology of personal development. In Torsunov's case, this problem is especially salient because of the profound differences in ISKCON philosophy, which requires a focus on transcendence and commitment to the spiritual

community, and New Age beliefs, which valorize the self as a divine entity that must be cultivated. Because these visions of the self are clearly at odds, Torsunov's attempt to marry the Vaishnava worldview and a self-help business is a delicate endeavor.

In the Russian public sphere, accusations of cultural appropriation are not common, but the liminality of Torsunov's spiritual teaching nevertheless creates unease. As his version of Vedic Wisdom moves into New Age territory, it extends further from its source tradition, attracting suspicion both from ISKCON adherents and from outsiders who perceive it as nonnative to Russian culture. What has secured Torsunov's success in this precarious position is his flexible approach to legitimation.

### LEGITIMATION LATTICE

According to James R. Lewis, legitimacy is “[a]n important ideological resource for emergent movements, particularly in hostile social environments.”<sup>52</sup> This resource has many uses: legitimation strategies serve in “making converts, maintaining followers, shaping public opinion, and appeasing government authorities,” and help leaders “justify their leadership positions to themselves.”<sup>53</sup> Because of his position between a new religious movement and the broader culture of popular psychology, Torsunov has to manage all of these factors. Unlike a leader of a closed community, beholden only to his followers, Torsunov has to manage his reputation in the eyes of a highly diverse audience. This requires a creative approach to maintaining legitimacy.

To reflect the multiplicity of legitimation strategies used in the realm of new religiosity, Lewis expands Max Weber's classic model of types of legitimate authority—traditional, legal, and charismatic<sup>54</sup>—into an elaborate taxonomy. Like Weber, Lewis distinguishes appeals to tradition, rationality, and charisma. But where Weber, at his own acknowledgment, described pure types, Lewis is interested in real-life uses of legitimation strategies as flexible tools that “emerge more or less spontaneously out of the ongoing life of the community.”<sup>55</sup> In Torsunov's practice, these strategies work together to support his legitimacy.

Torsunov presents himself as a doctor, scholar, healer, Ayurveda expert, and lifestyle guru, and his claims to authority extend across the realms of medicine, new religiosity, New Age, and popular psychology. Reflecting these influences, Torsunov relies on four legitimation strategies: (1) rational appeals to science and medicine, (2) traditional appeals to the Vedas and vaguely defined Indian wisdom, (3) appeals to his own charisma (extraordinary insights and abilities), and (4) appeals to his audience's common sense and stereotypes. These strategies,

overlapping but distinct, are the “strips” in the metaphorical lattice of his legitimation.

These legitimacy strips lend support to the discursive structure, but they also attract diverse challengers. While Torsunov maintains his own legitimation with relative success, many observers are not convinced. Critical discussions take place on review websites, on anti-Torsunov pages, and in mainstream media.<sup>56</sup> Some critics are direct competitors: religious actors from the Russian Orthodox Church, ISKCON and other Hindu movements, as well as alternative healers and even Wiccans. Others—secular anticultists, bloggers, and journalists—are external observers. The third group of detractors are former patients or Vedic Femininity followers. Occurring in different spaces, these conversations have surprising overlaps. In the next sections, I will discuss Torsunov’s legitimation strategies—the lattice strips—and his critics’ attempts to reveal the structure’s weakness.

## LATTICE STRIP 1: SCIENCE

### Science and Medicine

Though religion and science are sometimes pitted against each other, science often serves as a legitimating strategy for religious claims. While some religious authorities do seek to refute scientific claims, others relegate science to a separate domain, thus rendering science-based critiques of religion powerless.<sup>57</sup> Finally, some religious actors claim to be scientific, drawing on its aura of authority, which Lewis described as the charisma of science.<sup>58</sup>

Torsunov’s relationship to science does not neatly fit any one of the three scenarios. While he seeks association with scientific institutions, his work is at odds with mainstream academic and medical practices. His ambivalent attitude to science is not unusual: religious figures often selectively affirm the scientific claims that they find “acceptable and potentially confirming.”<sup>59</sup> Prabhupada himself, though adamant in his critique of Western scientists,<sup>60</sup> cited scientific findings to strengthen the authority of the Vedic tradition.<sup>61</sup> Torsunov inherits this ambivalence, but in his case the emphasis is flipped: while Prabhupada emphasized the superiority of Vedic knowledge *as science*, Torsunov makes consistent appeals to the mainstream scientific institutions that he also critiques.

First, Torsunov seeks affiliation with official scientific organizations—a task that is easier than it seems, given that experimental approaches to science have a history of being semi-accepted in Soviet and Russian institutions.<sup>62</sup> The title “doctor” points to his undergraduate degree in dermatovenerology. He has scientific patents for a device called “the healing napkin” (1996) and his phyto-reflexotherapy method (1997).<sup>63</sup>

Torsunov's 2003 website cites the Ministry of Health's approval of his methods (a claim later removed).<sup>64</sup> To reinforce his legitimacy, in 2012, Torsunov defended a Candidate of Medical Sciences dissertation at the Avetik Burnazian Federal Medical Biophysical Center, and published three short articles on the self-reported effects of positive motivation on healthy habits and personal value systems.<sup>65</sup> Torsunov's promotion of a healthy lifestyle was also officially recognized, albeit by nonscientific or parascientific bodies: the International Sobriety Academy (2011), the State Duma (2014), and the Ilya Mechnikov Russian Academy of Natural Sciences (2015).<sup>66</sup>

At the same time, Torsunov's alignment with the scientific establishment is selective. He dismisses experts who disagree with him as "country doctors" and polemicizes against Darwin.<sup>67</sup> Without rejecting science outright, he seeks to redefine it: "You may tell me that I don't have scientific knowledge, that I don't say scientific things. I think that on the contrary, I say scientific things. Real science must make people happy, not unhappy, and not confuse them but tell them the truth."<sup>68</sup> By subjugating scientific authority to the goal of increasing people's happiness, Torsunov manages to draw on scientific authority while critiquing it.

The belief that science should serve to improve people's lives shapes Torsunov's rhetoric. Instead of scientific arguments, he tells compelling anecdotes that simplify complex ideas and evoke emotional responses.<sup>69</sup> He is more likely to mention a private conversation with an, e.g., "leading professor of nutrition," than to cite a recent study. Personal anecdotes model for his audience how to interpret the world according to his teachings, but they do not convince his critics who value empiricism and statistics. Moreover, the power of these anecdotes is undercut by counternarratives of his former patients.

### **Pseudoscience and Malpractice**

The most serious criticisms of Torsunov's work pertain to medical claims. They fall into two categories: patient narratives and methodology critiques. One frequently reposted article detailed the personal experience of a former employee and patient of Torsunov's Amrita Center. The author included stories she had heard from others, along with a call for more testimonials. The response was overwhelming. Since then, stories of unsatisfied patients continue to appear online, reposted by anti-Torsunov bloggers. The most prominent themes in these narratives are suspect methodology, administrative negligence, and misdiagnosis.

Torsunov's former employee described a chaotic workplace where patients were neglected, methods unclear, and Torsunov's behavior

unquestioned. Other stories confirmed that Amrita's constantly changing rules required people to undergo many rounds of confusing procedures and purchase several healing kits of tree bark or stones, supposedly more powerful with each update. Many described the staff's rudeness and lack of expertise in medicine, nutrition, and Vedic astrology. Several mentioned dubious practices of sourcing precious stones, smuggling, and selling fakes.

The truly disturbing stories involve misdiagnosis and mistreatment. Torsunov is said to have falsely identified tuberculosis, a malignant tumor, and pregnancy, and prescribed ineffective or harmful treatments of conditions ranging from fever to melanoma. In some stories, Torsunov actively discouraged patients from getting medical treatment, causing a young girl to delay a vital operation, an infant to die without emergency care, and a Krishna devotee's wife to die of cancer. His claims that he can cure schizophrenia and AIDS are also infamous.<sup>70</sup> Detailed and emotionally compelling, patient stories are fodder for media controversy. Some were included in the exposé of alternative healers in the newspaper *Sovershenno Sekretno*.<sup>71</sup> When the COVID-19 pandemic reached Russia in March 2020, Torsunov announced that consumption of ginger and turmeric can prevent and cure the coronavirus, requesting that ginger be distributed during his lectures.<sup>72</sup> The statement went viral, causing ginger prices to spike.<sup>73</sup> In response to the ensuing media scandal, Torsunov made a statement calling on people to follow the government's directions, but the damage was done.<sup>74</sup> Such media controversies, backed by patients' stories, have inspired thorough investigations of Torsunov's practices.

Torsunov's critics question his methods, credentials, and scientific contributions. Many cast doubt on his education: one comments that "[a real] doctor cannot be confusing syndromes and symptoms";<sup>75</sup> another feels "sorry for the Samara Medical Institute" for having Torsunov as an alumnus;<sup>76</sup> and a third doubts that Torsunov has a degree at all.<sup>77</sup> One article points out that two of his articles are listed as published in non-existent issues of real journals.<sup>78</sup> One critic probes Torsunov's links with Indian Ayurvedic institutions, publishing an email exchange with a suspiciously elusive administrator. The article, though itself inconclusive, is frequently reposted.<sup>79</sup>

In response to accusations of malpractice and falsification of credentials, Torsunov has adjusted his legitimation strategies, adding academic publications to his website in 2013, and replacing bold claims with modest promises of preventative care.<sup>80</sup> These adjustments have spared him the seemingly inevitable legal trouble. Nevertheless, accusations of malpractice were troubling enough to concern ISKCON, which found itself implicated in the controversy. After all, Prabhupada's teaching formed a major source of legitimation in Torsunov's practice, and many of Torsunov's disappointed patients were Krishna devotees.

## LATTICE STRIP 2: INDIAN SPIRITUALITY

### **Ayurveda and Indian Wisdom**

Torsunov positions himself as a long-standing student of the “Eastern heritage,” and his early website had the subtitle “The Eastern Medicine ‘Ayurveda’ for All.”<sup>81</sup> To justify such appeals to Ayurveda, Torsunov characteristically relies on both institutional and anecdotal backing. His early website lists his associations with Indian institutions and teachings that have obvious ISKCON connections: the Bhaktivedanta Institute, the Bombay Bhaktivedanta Hospital, and the Bombay Ayurveda Institute of Vedic Health; Hindu texts of Manu Samhita and Chanakya Niti-Shastra; and the disciplines of Jyotisha (astrology) and Vastu Shastra (architecture). Torsunov also posted photographs from Krishna’s birthplace in Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh, invoked meetings with “prominent thinkers and philosophers” in India, and recounted travel anecdotes.<sup>82</sup>

ISKCON-specific references would be lost on many readers, but the aura of Indian expertise would have been impressive enough—especially in the early 2000s, during an economic downturn when international travel was not widely accessible to Russians. This legitimization strategy drew its force from the Western tradition of exoticizing Indian spirituality, strengthened by the long-standing narrative in Russian culture of shared Russian and Indian spiritual roots.<sup>83</sup> The approach allowed Torsunov to associate with Eastern-based spirituality circles beyond ISKCON by, for example, publishing in the *Yoga Journal*.<sup>84</sup>

The wider visibility of Torsunov’s claims to channel “Indian wisdom” also invited scrutiny. Torsunov rarely announces that his teachings are rooted in a specific doctrine, preferring vague references to the Vedas. This approach is congruent with Prabhupada’s conception of Vedic thought as “sacred knowledge” that is found in texts beyond the historical Vedic period.<sup>85</sup> However, since Torsunov’s links with ISKCON are easy to trace—he mentions Prabhupada, gives lectures in temples, and employs and promotes Krishna devotees—his vagueness may appear as evasiveness. An apparent reluctance to identify as a Vaishnava in the context of such obvious connections feeds his critics’ desire to reveal his “true agenda.”

### **Conversion and Brainwashing**

Many of Torsunov’s detractors question the validity of Indian wisdom or Torsunov’s access to it by demonizing ISKCON and alternative spirituality in general. Diverse Russian Orthodox, Russian Hindu, and

secular critics rely on classic anticultist motifs of brainwashing and threats to national security.

Russian Orthodox anticult websites often express concern about enterprising Krishna devotees like Torsunov, known to Russians outside of ISKCON as “Vedic psychology lecturers.” A prominent example is the investigation done by the Informational Consulting Center on Sectarianism in the Cathedral of the Great Prince and Holy Saint Alexander Nevsky in Novosibirsk. Referring to such teachings as “the Trojan horse of Krishnaites,” the article claims that the vegetarian *prasadam* they offer is a brainwashing tool, “desecrated by the devils . . . sacrificed to the dark spirit of Krishna,” which can “deform a person’s consciousness so much that they could stay a Krishnaites forever.”<sup>86</sup> Invoking national security, the article argues that ISKCON is a hostile agent of ideological warfare, supported by the Hindu nationalist organization Vishva Hindu Parishad and/or American-sponsored political interests. The anxiety voiced in the article responds to real challenges of globalization: religious movements do sometimes channel political interests, and the Vedas, much like the Bible, have been employed in service of radical agendas.<sup>87</sup> However, the article’s claims that partaking of *prasadam* will irrevocably “deform a person’s consciousness,” or that individual consumption of Indian ideas and goods threatens Russia’s economy, are unsubstantiated and simplistic. In an ironic twist, Russian Orthodox anti-Torsunov articles are themselves contaminated with ideologically foreign voices: arguments and quotes from ISKCON, Hindu, and feminist sources.<sup>88</sup>

Some Russian followers of Eastern-based spirituality believe Torsunov’s work to be a dangerous manifestation of an illegitimate Hindu sect. Participants in the yoga forum Goloka criticize ISKCON as a New Age bastardization of the Vedic tradition, and Torsunov as a self-interested pseudoguru who muddles Ayurveda with his own ideas.<sup>89</sup> Another example is an anti-ISKCON website run by an anonymous Russian proponent of “the anticult movement within Hinduism.” His articles document ISKCON’s troubled history and label Torsunov as a “charlatan,” a “Faux Vedist,” a “CryptoKrishnaites” and a “Krishnaites Doctor Frankenstein.”<sup>90</sup> While Russian Orthodox anticultists fear that Torsunov’s Vedic Wisdom threatens Russia with Indian religion, this critic sees danger in the Western ideology of monotheism, patriarchy, and capitalism, which underlies Torsunov’s Eastern-seeming teachings. Anxiety about Torsunov’s blend of Western and Eastern influences therefore cuts both ways.

Introducing a third perspective, secular bloggers also argue that Torsunov’s ISKCON roots delegitimize his authority but steer away from the sensationalist language of brainwashing or idol sacrifice. Instead, they explain Torsunov’s appeal in psychological or sociological terms and are often more light-hearted. One prominent figure is

Roman Zharkov, whose humorous YouTube videos thoughtfully engage with contemporary forms of spirituality. His “Vedic Manipulations” video series specifically analyzes the appeal of Torsunov.<sup>91</sup> According to Zharkov, Torsunov’s promises of a better life run counter to ISKCON teachings that see worldly success as an illusion. Torsunov’s real aim, Zharkov argues, must be to gain converts with exciting but unfulfillable promises.

Another common motif in secular critiques of Torsunov is the idea of a bastardized original, which can be revealed by unlayering the lattice of legitimation. Unsatisfied with Torsunov’s vague invocations of Vedic knowledge, many commenters enlist historical sources to challenge such claims to legitimacy. One critic writes that Torsunov’s teachings are untraceable to Vedic texts: “all the bullcrap spread by Torsunov . . . and other ‘Sages’—none of that is in there. Please remember: THE VEDAS SAY NOTHING OF THE SORT.”<sup>92</sup> For commenters like him, revealing Torsunov’s Krishna connection is a step toward analyzing the sociocultural and psychological significance of his teachings. This often involves implicit or explicit judgment of Torsunov’s audience as poorly educated or desperate. Unsurprisingly, Torsunov’s followers are eager to reject such implications. Many argue that the teachings do not require conversion,<sup>93</sup> an assertion supported by my fieldwork experience.

Still, accusations of proselytization and brainwashing have impacted Torsunov’s legitimation strategies. Drawing on the relative tolerance of ISKCON doctrine, which sees all religions as forms of worshiping Krishna, Torsunov asserts that everyone needs to find their own tradition; he even plays Russian Orthodox hymns during lectures to accommodate his audience.<sup>94</sup> Deemphasizing the authority of Indian wisdom in this way, Torsunov falls back on the third strip of his legitimation lattice, his personal charisma as a spiritual leader. This strategy is particularly useful in justifying his unique alternative healing practices.

### LATTICE STRIP 3: CHARISMA

#### Charisma and Psychic Abilities

One self-development website explains Torsunov’s popularity with his preacher-like “charisma and magnetism.”<sup>95</sup> While Torsunov rarely makes explicit claims to having extraordinary power, he is acutely aware of the possibilities of charisma as a source of legitimacy. Torsunov cultivates an aura of exceptionality but modulates it to mitigate its dangers.

According to Weber, charisma is “a quality by virtue of which supernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional powers or properties are attributed to the individual.”<sup>96</sup> Today, charismatic authority is often

associated with the realm of religion, in keeping with the etymological meaning of the Greek word *charisma*—a divine gift.<sup>97</sup> Charisma is frequently invoked to describe leaders of new religious movements as “visionary [and] emotionally expressive,” unusually bold, energetic, and capacious in their focus on both large-scale problems and their followers’ lives.<sup>98</sup> Importantly, this quality is a matter of perception: charisma appears when others see the individual as extraordinary. Charisma is therefore less of a source than an intense *bind* of authority, providing the leader and the followers with certain benefits. As Lorne L. Dawson shows, this view of charisma also makes it possible to analyze: an inner quality is difficult to measure; a relationship, however, can be observed.<sup>99</sup>

To maintain a charismatic relationship with his audience, Torsunov gives voice to other people’s perceptions of him, in addition to describing himself as extraordinary. First, Torsunov’s website showcases followers who celebrate his special knowledge, healing abilities, or personal saintliness. One commenter effusively describes Torsunov’s unforgettable gaze and touch, thanking him for the miraculous healing of her daughter; another compares him to Jesus. Second, Torsunov himself makes straightforward statements of exceptional knowledge and skills, mentioning an extraordinary ability to diagnose people by sight or promising effective treatment of “practically all chronic illnesses.”<sup>100</sup> Such bold statements have limited persuasive power on their own, which is why Torsunov solicits stories of successful healings and encourages people to test his powers live or over the phone.

Presenting himself as a gifted psychic, Torsunov invites associations with celebrity healers who became popular in Russia the 1990s, including the infamous Anatoly Kashpirovsky (b. 1939), who drew in huge audiences before losing public trust.<sup>101</sup> In his lectures, Torsunov seeks to distance himself from such unwanted parallels by mocking Kashpirovsky as a charlatan, but they are hard to shake off, especially when his own assertions of authority are unsubtle. Over time, Torsunov’s rhetoric has been refined, but he still regularly resorts to claims of having an extraordinary status: for example, assuring his audience that his afterlife prospects are superior to theirs: “the Lord has already shown me where I’ll be after death. . . . I saw a pure beautiful place. And I am awaited by exalted people. The Lord won’t tell *you* where you’ll go after you leave your body. Because such knowledge would sadden many of you.”<sup>102</sup> Such self-aggrandizing statements, combined with exaggerated promises, naturally raise suspicion. As Dawson notes, “continuous self-promotion” reveals the mechanism of legitimation instead of making authority seem natural.<sup>103</sup>

Torsunov manages this danger by strategically downplaying the role of charisma within his repertoire of legitimation. A more obviously charismatic leader would lose legitimacy if caught acting as an ordinary

person, but Torsunov embraces and takes advantage of both his ordinariness and his exceptionality.<sup>104</sup> As a result, his passionate defenders, such as Olga Valyaeva, depict him as a person like any other who has become extraordinary by working on himself.<sup>105</sup> The more restrained reviews of Torsunov's work on his website also focus on his personality without veering into veneration.

Still, Torsunov's bolder moves frequently backfire. During live lectures, audience members have unscripted reactions to his claims, sometimes doubting or rejecting them. In these situations, Torsunov does not admit defeat; instead, he calls skeptical listeners "hypnotized"<sup>106</sup> and dismisses his opponents' arguments as "hogwash."<sup>107</sup> These responses generate even more negative feedback.

Charisma can easily be challenged because it is based in a relationship; relying on charismatic authority thus remains a "fundamentally precarious" task.<sup>108</sup> In Torsunov's case, this danger is compounded by the fact that he represents a larger movement with a clearly defined doctrine.

### **Vulgarizing and Profiteering**

By playing up his personal charisma, Torsunov adds fuel to the unease that some Russian ISKCON members have about his doctrinal accuracy. Is Torsunov popularizing Prabhupada's teachings or confusing inexperienced listeners? The problem is exacerbated by the facts that Torsunov's work has been controversial and that he earns a profit off it. This led ISKCON leadership to conduct a formal investigation of his practice.

Concerns about Torsunov were raised on the Russian ISKCON forum in 2012, in a debate about whether spiritual teachers can accept money for their work.<sup>109</sup> At the time, malpractice complaints from ISKCON members were already circulating online, and Torsunov's Amrita Center was criticized for not meeting Vaishnava standards.<sup>110</sup> A group of anonymous devotees identified errors in Torsunov's references to Ayurveda.<sup>111</sup> In February 2013, the National Council of the Center of Krishna Consciousness Societies in Russia received an open letter from a group of devotees requesting an investigation of Torsunov's activity to address accusations of malpractice, exaggerated claims, and doctrinal inaccuracy.<sup>112</sup> Acknowledging Torsunov's contribution to popularizing Prabhupada's teachings, the writers nevertheless warned that his ethical and legal troubles could reflect badly on the movement, encourage anticulists, and traumatize young devotees. A month later, the Council promised to conduct a comprehensive audit and published Torsunov's response, in which he acknowledged that his healing methods are unrelated to Ayurveda, stated that the Amrita Centre was

improving its practices, and cited the positive results of a February 2013 legal inspection, conducted after an anonymous complaint.<sup>113</sup> Three months later, a lawyer, doctor, and Vaishnava representative carried out the ISKCON audit, which confirmed that Amrita met most sanitary, legal, licensing, and spiritual standards, aside from minor problems with record-keeping, exaggerated claims, and Vaishnava conduct.<sup>114</sup>

Although Torsunov often remembers that year as a period of trials, ISKCON's response was respectful and positive. He continues to give lectures to devotee audiences. Still, his position in the movement remains conflicted. Media exposés about Torsunov continue to affect ISKCON's reputation, and independent devotee groups online denounce Torsunov with citations from the Bhagavad Gita, satirical memes, and video mashups.<sup>115</sup> Some members of Torsunov's audience, however, are untroubled by these issues because they see him not as a psychic or a Vedic sage, but as a relatable teacher who offers practical advice.

## LATTICE STRIP 4: STEREOTYPES

### Casual Register and Stereotypes

Despite claims to exceptionality, Torsunov's speech and mannerisms are not particularly sage-like. His lectures are interspersed with casual slang, sayings, popular songs, and comedy. Appealing to an audience's emotions, these elements amplify Torsunov's approachability. Similarly, by obliquely mentioning his personal or work problems, Torsunov shows that he faces the same challenges as his audience: he just has better tools to tackle them.

To ensure that his teachings speak to an average Russian, Torsunov highlights their practicality by invoking ordinary experiences. In doing so, he presents himself as a guy-next-door who happens to be privy to complex knowledge. This knowledge can be verified by "looking at life," rather than through scientific study. Marshaling truisms, stereotypes, and anecdotes, Torsunov presents his ideas as simple and familiar to his audience—in other words, as common sense.

Torsunov's lectures constantly reference contemporary realities: the post-Soviet crisis of values and gender norms, political chaos, health, and economic struggles. He invokes ethnic stereotypes to explain the benefits of certain lifestyle choices or to normalize life difficulties, invoking the image of coconut-eating African tribes to prove the benefits of vegetarianism,<sup>116</sup> and using karma to explain climate differences between India and Russia.

Gender stereotypes provide the foundation for Torsunov's Vedic Femininity teachings. A proper woman must commit herself to her

family rather than external connections; respect, admire, and obey her man; organize and perform domestic tasks; be faithful and sexy; wear jewelry and long skirts; and eat sweets to cultivate cheerfulness. Meanwhile, the man is expected to take the lead within the family and maintain relationships with people outside it, understand the meaning of life, and find a job according to his nature. He must make money to expand the domestic space and provide his wife with jewelry, clothes, and sweets. These commandments reflect not sociological realities, but patriarchal stereotypes widely accepted in Russian society. They naturalize Torsunov's claims and give his listeners a sense of security by confirming existing biases. However, precisely because Vedic Femininity is the most wide-reaching of Torsunov's teachings, it is also vulnerable to the widest range of critics. At this point, Torsunov's reliance on stereotypes backfires.

### **Sexism and Bad Psychology**

Psychologists, journalists, feminist bloggers, and women who began to doubt Vedic Femininity teachings express concerns about the consequences of embracing gender stereotypes promoted by Torsunov. Appearing in personal blogs in 2013, such critiques have since consolidated into online communities<sup>117</sup> and appeared in the media. Critics rely on the authority of psychology, gender theory, personal narratives, and humor. Torsunov's name is near-absent from these debates, which usually target his follower Olga Valyaeva, reflecting how far the reach and significance of Vedic Wisdom has stretched. Debates about Vedic Femininity shift the conversation from debunking one man's claims to a larger critique of gender roles.

Many critics have turned to psychology frameworks, explaining that the simple rituals of Vedic Femininity, such as wearing a skirt, appeal to young women who feel lost or insecure in their own identities.<sup>118</sup> They argue that such teachings encourage inauthentic and manipulative behavior under the guise of spirituality. The teachings harm, above all, the Vedic woman herself. At best, she secures a provider on terms that prevent her from truly experiencing love and self-understanding. At worst, she faces codependency, spousal abuse, and depression. Many critics point out that neither Torsunov, who is rumored to have been married multiple times,<sup>119</sup> nor his entrepreneurial female followers seem to be following the teachings themselves.<sup>120</sup> These psychology-based critiques suggest non-gendered approaches to finding fulfillment: developing all aspects of your personality, learning about yourself and others, and cultivating compassion. They recommend books by psychiatrists Jane Shinoda Bolen (*Goddesses in Everywoman*, 1984) and Clarissa Pinkola Estés (*Women Who Run with the Wolves*, 1992), who use Jungian

psychoanalysis to emphasize a wider range of feminine expression—both meekness and wildness, both submission and power.

Many articles make the feminist arguments that Vedic Femininity disadvantages women and equips possessive men with tools of oppression. Some explicitly draw on gender theory, describing Vedic Femininity as a patriarchal assault on feminism or an iteration of sexist “women’s rules” that support state-sanctioned social conservatism and distract people from socioeconomic problems.<sup>121</sup> Other critics eschew references to gender theory, but make profoundly feminist arguments, highlighting the material advantages that men derive from the Vedic Femininity ideology and calling it “a fucking manual on driving a woman into her grave—with her own hands, no less.”<sup>122</sup> A prominent example is psychologist Evgeniya Zadrutskaya’s website *Slushai Dushu* (“Listen to Soul”). Zadrutskaya offers a systematic critique of Vedic Femininity, chronicles her own experience with the teachings, and posts stories submitted by readers.<sup>123</sup> These stories contribute to the online circulation of Vedic Femininity recovery narratives.

Documenting women’s negative experiences, narratives of recovery are the backbone of Vedic Femininity critiques. These stories have a conversion/deconversion arc, tracing women’s journeys from initial enthusiasm through a period of depression to rejection of the teachings and a sense of empowerment. Vedic Femininity here appears not as a gateway to ISKCON, but as a patriarchal “cult” of its own. One particularly detailed story documents a woman’s despair at her failure to be submissive and enjoy feminine handicrafts, which almost drives her to quit university. Most narratives end on an uplifting note, with the writer taking responsibility for her well-being. This compelling pattern of conversion to and recovery from Vedic Femininity was taken up in the media and even fiction.<sup>124</sup>

While personal recovery narratives tend to be serious, some critics of Vedic Femininity use humor to reveal its limitations. Blogger Lena Malaa takes Torsunov’s rhetoric to its natural, and absurd, conclusion: “What unfeminine creatures we are. Forgot our great purpose, learned to read, write, think. Having learned to think, began using profanities. The most brazen ones went to work and even started making money.”<sup>125</sup> The online project “Women’s Kingdom: In a Harmonious Search for a Master” offers an elaborate parody of Vedic Femininity in eight videos: “Vedic literacy” webinars explaining “how to become a Real Woman” through wearing giant loose dresses or shaving off your eyebrows, personal testimonials of transformations “from a human into a Woman,” and men’s defenses of their equal rights to cultivate their own Vedic Femininity.<sup>126</sup>

With its growing visibility, Vedic Femininity has reached more potential critics in mainstream platforms, from *Cosmopolitan* to YouTube.<sup>127</sup> In response, its proponents have to readjust their approach. Valyaeva has acknowledged that the pursuit of femininity can become an unhealthy

obsession.<sup>128</sup> While Torsunov is less widely known and less pressed to respond, these critiques still profoundly challenge his legitimization strategies because they reject the commonsense authority of gender stereotypes on which he relies. In these circles, Torsunov's popularization of patriarchal ideas does not legitimate his teachings, but rather illuminates the limitations of restrictive gender roles and encourages their spontaneous contextual critique.

## CONCLUSION

The idiosyncratic edifice of authority claims constructed by Oleg Torsunov is not simply a striking example of contemporary alternative spirituality. It illuminates how such forms of spirituality continue to function and influence Russian society despite their marginalized status. To create a widely appealing teaching, Torsunov draws on a variety of legitimization sources: the authorities of science, Eastern spirituality, personal charisma, and gender stereotypes. These sources are diverse and sometimes even conflicting: Torsunov invokes both official and unofficial science and presents himself as both average and extraordinary. What holds this heterogeneous lattice together is the rhetorical glue of Vedic Wisdom: a vague discursive construct with many connotations but no single referent. The notion of Vedic Wisdom, popularized in Russia by Torsunov and other ISKCON lecturers, now functions as a shortcut to legitimization for diverse actors, pointing to an authority at once serious and untraceable.

Torsunov's detractors are eager to point out the weaknesses of his approach to legitimization, critiquing his ambivalent relationship to ISKCON, dubious medical practices, doctrinal inaccuracies, and sexist psychological teachings. Coming from Russian Orthodox, Hindu, Vaishnava, feminist, and other viewpoints, Torsunov's critics warn against brainwashing, malpractice, bastardizing spiritual truth for profit, and gender stereotypes. Some commenters pursue investigations with reference to sacred texts or laws, while others employ the same methods as Torsunov to delegitimize him, recounting anecdotes and appealing to emotions.<sup>129</sup> Some use humor to expose the absurdity of his claims or analyze Russia's religious landscape. Some focus on Torsunov's personal life, others on his ideas. The debates around Torsunov are "arguments over classification,"<sup>130</sup> questioning whether his work represents proper science, medicine, or psychology, and whether it is a part of a religious organization, its illegitimate offshoot, or a popular manifestation of an illegitimate cult.

While Torsunov sometimes reacts aggressively to criticism (in 2018, he called on the audience to physically attack his critics),<sup>131</sup> usually he simply adjusts his legitimization strategies in response to challenges.

Addressing some concerns can be straightforward—for example, Torsunov defended a dissertation to strengthen his scientific credentials—but, given the variety of accusations, responding to the critics requires some work. Adjusting the supporting strips of his legitimation lattice, Torsunov has to balance showcasing his academic research with reiterating the superior nature of Vedic science and deflecting accusations of proselytization with demonstrating faithfulness to Krishna. His renewed legitimation strategies remain diverse, if not mutually exclusive, but, as this article has shown, the success of a legitimation lattice does not depend on internal coherence.

The flexible legitimation lattice endows its users with two important advantages: it allows them to selectively align with the cultural mainstream and to shift between different sources in grounding of their authority. Using the first strategy, Torsunov downplays the more exotic aspects of his teachings, disavows their potentially radical aspects, and emphasizes traditional gender values and skepticism about science, which belong in the cultural mainstream. He also seeks to align himself with scientific institutions and avoids confrontation with the government. Even his invocations of Indian spirituality are infused with a patriotic spirit. Drawing on ISKCON's relative tolerance for other faiths, Torsunov expresses approval of the Russian Orthodox tradition without compromising his own. Aligning the separate strips of his legitimation lattice with various aspects of mainstream culture, Torsunov presents himself as an upholder, rather than challenger, of the status quo.

The second strategy enabled by the legitimation lattice is the ability to shift emphasis as needed. The locus of Torsunov's authority is spread out. When challenged on one subject, he can turn to audiences who are interested in other aspects of his work. For example, when critics attack him on scientific grounds, he can shift to the language of spirituality, invoke his personal expertise in Indian wisdom, or emphasize the practical value of his teachings.

The critics' efforts have, however, impressed some members of Torsunov's audience. Some women I interviewed found the controversies around Torsunov to be revelatory and testimonials of former "Vedic Women" to be a valuable resource. Other people remain unmoved, dismissing unsavory details as irrelevant biographical data, gossip, or defamation. In comment sections, blogs, and forum discussions, Torsunov's defenders argue that his ideas are free, useful to independent-thinking listeners, and do not require conversion. For many, the draw of Vedic Wisdom does not lie in Prabhupada's or Krishna's authority, scientific research, or even Torsunov's own charisma, but rather in the perceived practical use of his teachings in daily life. This is evidenced by letters of readers whom Torsunov inspired to clean the house, face life challenges, take up jogging, explore spiritual

traditions, and improve their health by using tree roots.<sup>132</sup> To these readers, Torsunov's legitimacy is of secondary importance.

Despite the determined efforts of his critics, Torsunov has not sunk into obscurity or been obliterated by scandal. His teachings continue to appeal to both ISKCON devotees and broader audiences, weathering bigger obstacles than targeted critique. Vedic Wisdom in Russia is flourishing in a cultural climate that is hostile to forms of spirituality perceived as nontraditional. In this article, I have argued that controversial opinion leaders such as Torsunov persist in the public sphere in part because they make use of the legitimation lattice.

The legitimation mechanism that underlies the idea of Vedic Wisdom appears beyond alternative spirituality. It helps explain the persuasive power of unsubstantiated claims, evident not only in Torsunov's lectures, but also, for example, in Donald Trump's erratic tweeting. The model of a legitimation lattice highlights that in order to be persuasive, the locus of authority does not have to lie in an exceptionally robust source. What matters is the person's facility in juggling these sources. The legitimation lattice, with its flexible structure of discrete interlocking "strips," allows empirically unsupported and easily debunked views to remain resilient and attractive. Legitimation lattices are moving targets that require their users to keep adjusting their strategies in response to actual or potential attacks. Their very complexity makes them vulnerable as well as resilient.

Above all, legitimation lattices are generative: they attract criticisms and allow for adjustment; they encourage broader conversations about the topics raised by the public figure, as well as the nature of authority, evidence, and truth. Controversies about Torsunov allow their participants to articulate questions that go beyond one man's reputation. The Torsunov debates are overlapping processes of vernacular theorizing, tackling subjects such as the nature of religiosity and its place in today's Russia; the comparative importance of tradition, sacred writings, science, charisma, or common sense; Russian gender roles; and the psychology of wanting instructions on how to live and the self-development industry that feeds that desire. These conversations result in emerging bodies of knowledge available to those who reach for them.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marat Shterin, “Friends and Foes of the ‘Russian World’: The Post-Soviet State’s Management of Religious Diversity,” in *The Politics and Practice of Religious Diversity: National Contexts, Global Issues*, ed. Andrew Dawson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 29–48; Sanna Turoma and Kaarina Aitamurto, “Introduction: Renegotiating Patriotic and Religious Identities in the Post-Soviet and Post-secular Russia,” *Transcultural Studies* 12 (2016): 1–14.

<sup>2</sup> Russia often appears in Western news as a repressive bastion of patriarchy. Mainstream Russian media promotes a positively inflected version of this image: that of a traditional country besieged by corrupting foreign forces.

<sup>3</sup> Snapshots of Torsunov.ru are available on the web archive Wayback Machine from 10 April 2003. I have been collecting material pertaining to Torsunov since 2012. The online posts I cite are anonymized, except in the case of public figures, journalists, and bloggers. Translations from Russian are mine, except where the authors provide their own.

<sup>4</sup> I conducted interviews in St Petersburg, Pskov, and Yoshkar-Ola in 2012–2014 and revisited these conversations in 2017 and 2018.

<sup>5</sup> James R. Lewis, “How Religions Appeal to the Authority of Science,” in *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science*, ed. James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer (Leiden: Brill, 2010): 23–40.

<sup>6</sup> Jeanne Kormina, “Drozhzhi-ubiitsy: gartronomicheskaja konspirologija i kul’tura nedoverija v sovremennoj Rossii,” *Antropologicheskii Forum* 27 (2015): 142–175, 158, available at <http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/027/kormina.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Andrei Tiukhtiaev, “Proigryvaniie gendernykh identichnostei v srede n’iu-eidzh (na primere palomnichestva k arkheologicheskim pamiatnikam v Krasnodarskom kraie),” *Zhurnal sotsiologii i sotsialnoi antropologii* 20, no. 5 (2017): 151–166, 152, available at [http://www.jourssa.ru/sites/all/files/volumes/2017\\_5/Tiukhtiaev\\_2017\\_5.pdf](http://www.jourssa.ru/sites/all/files/volumes/2017_5/Tiukhtiaev_2017_5.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Colin Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,” in *The Cultic Milieu*, eds. Jeffrey Kaplan and Helène Lööw (Oxford University Press, 2002), 14. On the Late Soviet “cultic milieu,” see Birgit Menzel, “Introduction,” in *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions*, eds. Birgit Menzel, Michael Hagemester, and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (München, Berlin: Kubon & Sagner, 2012), 11–28.

<sup>9</sup> Menzel, “Introduction,” 11; Alexander Panchenko, “New Religious Movements and the Study of Folklore: The Russian Case,” *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 28 (2004): 111–128, 114, available at <http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol28/movement.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> E. Burke Rochford, Jr., *Hare Krishna Transformed* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 12. An influential offshoot of Chaitanya or Gaudiya Vaishnavism, ISKCON has roots in sixteenth century Bengal.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin E. Zeller, “One Foot in Helsinki, One Foot in Mayapur: ISKCON Finland as a Glocal European Religion,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 9 (2016): 66–90, 72.

<sup>12</sup> Rochford, *Hare Krishna Transformed*, 7–8. On classification of religious movements on the basis of their relation to the wider society, see Roy Wallis, *The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life* (London: Routledge, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Rasa Pranskevičiūtė and Tadas Juras, “Acting in the Underground: Life as a Hare Krishna Devotee in the Soviet Republic of Lithuania,” *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe* 7, no. 1 (2014): 3–22, available at <https://www.rascee.net/index.php/rascee/article/view/74/76>.

<sup>14</sup> Shterin, “New Religions in the New Russia,” 312.

<sup>15</sup> Kaarina Aitamurto, *Paganism, Traditionalism, Nationalism: Narratives of Russian Rodnoverie* (London: Routledge, 2016); Julia Andreeva, “Proekty preobrazovaniia mira v novom religioznom dvizhenii ‘Anastasiia’: antropologicheskie aspekty religii Niu-Eidzh v sovremennoi Rossii,” (PhD diss., Muzei antropologii i etnografii im. Petra Velikogo [Kunstkamera], 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Panchenko, “New Religious Movements,” 126.

<sup>17</sup> Oleg Khlyakin, “K voprosu o sviazi vesternizatsii s netraditsionnoi religioznost’iu v Rossii,” *Izvestiia Irkutskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* 20 (2017), 130–136, 130, available at <https://izvestiapolit.isu.ru/en/article/file?id=1511>; Joanna Urbańczyk, “‘What If It Is Actually True?’ Vissarion’s Followers from Eastern Europe and their Path to the Last Testament Church Community in Siberia,” *Nova Religio* 20, no. 3 (2017): 73–100, 96, available at <https://nr.ucpress.edu/content/ucpnovo/20/3/74.full-text.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Shterin, “New Religions in the New Russia,” 316.

<sup>19</sup> James Beckford, “The Mass Media and New Religious Movements,” *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, eds. Bryan Wilson and Jamie Cresswell (London: Routledge, 1999), 103–119.

<sup>20</sup> James R. Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003): 202.

<sup>21</sup> Turoma and Aitamurto, “Introduction,” 4.

<sup>22</sup> Shterin, “New Religions in the New Russia,” 315.

<sup>23</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev coined the term “Stagnation” to describe the 1964–1985 period of economic slowdown and cultural censorship.

<sup>24</sup> “Torsunov O.G. rasskazyvaet o svoiom stanovlenii na duhovnom puti 13.01. 2017 (02),” *Torsunov Oleg Gennadievich*, 10 February 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rChRyMJSS9E>.

<sup>25</sup> The medical field of dermatovenerology focuses on skin conditions and sexually transmitted infections.

<sup>26</sup> ISKCON devotees may undergo two rounds of initiation: the first bestows on them a Sanskrit name; the second gives the status of *brahmana* and the ability to perform specific rites. See Rochford, *Hare Krishna Transformed*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> “O.G. Torsunov & ko: Vostochnaia meditsina Ayurveda dlia vseh,” *Torsunov.ru*, 10 April 2003, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20030410062936/http://www.torsunov.ru/>. Lithotherapy is a method of healing with stones.

<sup>28</sup> “Konsul’tativnyi tsentr vedicheskoi kul’tury doktora O.Torsunova v Rige,” *Torsunov.ru*, 31 August 2004, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20041204191708/http://www.torsunov.ru/Latvia.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> “Istoriia,” Amrita Center, <https://amrita.center/pages/history>.

<sup>30</sup> *Torsunov.ru*, <http://torsunov.ru/>, accessed 8 April 2020.

<sup>31</sup> In 2010, Torsunov even had a brush with the law. His lectures were featured on a CD that used an unauthorized image of the then-president Dmitry Medvedev. This attracted the attention of authorities, and although Torsunov suffered no legal consequence, he moved his Centre outside of Moscow shortly after.

<sup>32</sup> As of 15 April 2020. Titles include *Dr. Torsunov’s Good Advice: Healing Migraines* (2004), *Vedas and Business: Your Purpose and Success in Business and Management* (2016), *Vedas on Man and Woman: Methods of Building Proper Relationships* (2016).

<sup>33</sup> As of 15 August 2020.

<sup>34</sup> “Otzyvy,” <http://torsunov.ru/review>, accessed 15 August 2020.

<sup>35</sup> “Onlain-obuchenie O.G.Torsunova,” <https://torsunov-online.ru/>, accessed 15 August 2020.

<sup>36</sup> “Veda Radio,” <http://vedaradio.fm/>, accessed 15 August 2020.

<sup>37</sup> “Otkryslia internet magazin blagostnyh tovarov ‘Ecoveda,’” *Torsunov.ru*, 13 April 2017, <http://torsunov.ru/news/otkryslia-internet-magazin-blagostnyh-tovarov-ecoveda>.

<sup>38</sup> John Fahy, “The Constructive Ambiguity of Vedic Culture in ISKCON Mayapur,” *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 11 (2018): 234–259, 254.

<sup>39</sup> Irina Sadovina, “The New Age Paradox: Spiritual Consumerism and Traditional Authority at the Child of Nature Festival in Russia,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32, no. 1 (2017): 91, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13537903.2016.1256653>.

<sup>40</sup> Rochford, *Hare Krishna Transformed*, 115–60.

<sup>41</sup> For example, Katerina Dorokhova, Ruslan Narushevich, Olga Valyaeva.

<sup>42</sup> In some cases, these femininity teachings even describe themselves as “Vedic.” The term is used in many Russian Pagan communities to refer to the ancient Slavic tradition. For example, the website of the Rodobozhie movement includes a list of 64 essential arts for men and women, rooted in “Vedic Heritage of the Ancestors.” See Veleदार Nevogradsky, “64 iskusstva, neobhodimye muzhchine i zhenschine dlia dostizheniia sovershenstva,” *Rodobogie.org*, 8 February 2015, <https://rodobogie.org/64-iskusstva>. Vladimir Kurovskii, a Native Faith leader from Ukraine, has published books on Slavic Vedic family values with his ex-wife Lada, including *The Goddess Woman Creates the Family. Kin’s Practices of Attracting Abundance (Zhenschina-boginia tvorit sem’iu. Rodovye praktiki privilecheniia blagopoluchiiia)* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> John Gray, *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); *Beyond Mars and Venus: Relationship Skills for Today’s Complex World* (Dallas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2017). Another example is Christian author Stormie Omartian’s *The Power of a Praying Wife* (2002), which is frequently featured on Torsunov’s VedaRadio.

<sup>44</sup> Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (London: Routledge, 2008), xi.

<sup>45</sup> Nicole Karapanagiotis, “Of Digital Images and Digital Media: Approaches to Marketing in American ISKCON,” *Nova Religio* 21, no. 3 (2018): 74–102, 92, available at <https://nr.ucpress.edu/content/ucpnovo/21/3/74.full.pdf>. See also

Bryan Wilson, "Introduction," in *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, 1–11, 6. For a critical take, see Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> Rochford, *Hare Krishna Transformed*, 63.

<sup>47</sup> Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, "Of Churches, Sects, and Cults," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 18, no. 2 (1979): 117–33.

<sup>48</sup> Guy Redden, "The Secret, Cultural Property and the Construction of the Spiritual Commodity," *Cultural Studies Review* 18, no. 2 (2012): 52–73, 53, available at <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj/index>.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Heelas, "Prosperity and the New Age Movement: The Efficacy of Spiritual Economics," in *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*: 51–77.

<sup>50</sup> Redden, "The Secret," 54.

<sup>51</sup> Véronique Altglas, *From Yoga to Kabbalah: Religious Exoticism and the Logics of Bricolage*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 2014): 216.

<sup>52</sup> Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions*, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions*, 12.

<sup>54</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978): 215.

<sup>55</sup> Lewis, "How Religions Appeal," 25.

<sup>56</sup> Examples of review websites are Otvovik.com and AllCoaches.ru. Resources such as WikiCompromat, Nekompetentnosti.net, and Protorsunova critique public figures perceived as unethical.

<sup>57</sup> James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer, "Introduction," in *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science*, 4.

<sup>58</sup> Lewis, "How Religions Appeal," 26.

<sup>59</sup> Lewis and Hammer, "Introduction," 6.

<sup>60</sup> Lewis and Hammer, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>61</sup> Benjamin E. Zeller, "One Foot in Helsinki," 250. See also Benjamin E. Zeller, "Inverted Orientalism, Vedic Science, and the Modern World: Bhaktivedanta and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness," in *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science*, 249–277.

<sup>62</sup> Menzel, "Introduction," 18.

<sup>63</sup> The "healing napkin" (an herb-covered cloth) and "phytotherapy" (the application of herbs to the skin) aim to improve the central nervous system. "Lechebnaia salfetka," *Freepatent.ru*, <http://www.freepatent.ru/patents/2067856>; "Sposob ipplikatornoi fitorefleksoterapii," *Freepatent.ru*, <http://www.freepatent.ru/patents/2071346>, both accessed 12 June 2019.

<sup>64</sup> "O.G. Torsunov & ko."

<sup>65</sup> "Publikatsii," *Torsunov.ru*, <http://torsunov.ru/publication>, accessed 12 June 2019.

<sup>66</sup> An independent organization criticized by the Russian Academy of Sciences for low membership standards.

<sup>67</sup> Torsunov, "Krishnaity 28. Vegetarianstvo i krishnaizm. Torsunov O.G.," *Pigurenko*, 21 January 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFG1Q0yw-cU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFG1Q0yw-cU;);

Torsunov, "Raskrytie svoego prednaznacheniiia. Lektsiia 1," audio file, 1 December 2008, <http://torsunov.ru/lecture/raskrytie-svoego-prednaznacheniyariga-dekabr-2008>.

<sup>68</sup> Torsunov, "Kak poniat' – chto mne Bog daet, a chto ne moe i brat' ne nado," Video recording of lecture, Rostov-on-Don, 4 August 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m\\_MbiQl1uEE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_MbiQl1uEE).

<sup>69</sup> This is a common rhetorical strategy in vernacular critiques of science. See Kormina, "Drozhzhi-ubiitsy," 145.

<sup>70</sup> Video recordings of these claims are no longer available, but some sources link to [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdCE\\_-LIXYE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdCE_-LIXYE).

<sup>71</sup> Anna Perova, "Kak 'narodnye tseliteli' ubivaiut liudei," *Sovershenno Sekretno*, 16 October 2015, <https://www.sovsekretno.ru/articles/id/5108>.

<sup>72</sup> "Torsunov o koronavirusе, imbire i kurkume," Video recording of lecture, Omsk, 27 March 2020, [https://vk.com/video288490615\\_456240002](https://vk.com/video288490615_456240002).

<sup>73</sup> Alena Germanova, "Tysiachi rossiian vser'ioz reshili borotsia s koronavirusom narodnoi meditsinoi," 6 April 2020, *Pervyi Kanal*, [https://www.ltv.ru/news/2020-04-06/383315-tysyachi\\_rossiyan\\_vseriez\\_reshili\\_borotsya\\_s\\_koronavirusom\\_narodnoy\\_meditsinoy](https://www.ltv.ru/news/2020-04-06/383315-tysyachi_rossiyan_vseriez_reshili_borotsya_s_koronavirusom_narodnoy_meditsinoy).

<sup>74</sup> Torsunov, "Kak zaschitit' sebja i svoih blizkih ot infektsii vo vremja epidemii?" 31 March 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFDaoJhF\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFDaoJhF_E).

<sup>75</sup> *Otzovik.com*, August 2016.

<sup>76</sup> Lual, "Takie professionaly," *Vsia ostal'naiia zhizn'*, 15 August 2013, <https://lual.livejournal.com/365034.html>.

<sup>77</sup> "Torsunov O.G. – Vedanutyj doctor," *AllCoaches.ru*, 24 July 2016, <http://allcoaches.ru/eksperty/torsunov-o-g-vedanutyj-doktor.html>.

<sup>78</sup> This citation mistake was eventually corrected.

<sup>79</sup> ILYA, "Torsunov – Perepiska s sekretariom doktora," *Antismi.ru*, 14 March 2011, <http://www.antismi.ru/blog/soul/68.html>.

<sup>80</sup> "Nauchnaia deiatel'nost' tsentra," Torsunov.ru, 31 October 2013, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20131031163523/http://torsunov.ru/center/nauchnaja-dejatelnost-centra.html>.

<sup>81</sup> "O.G. Torsunov & ko."

<sup>82</sup> "O avtore," *Torsunov.ru*, 3 February 2005, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20050203185713/http://torsunov.ru/o%20nas.htm>. Since 2010, foreign institutions are no longer mentioned, perhaps in response to a changing political climate.

<sup>83</sup> Altglas, *From Yoga to Kabbalah*; Larisa Honey, "Transforming Selves and Society: Women, Spiritual Health and Pluralism in Post-Soviet Moscow," (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2006), 258.

<sup>84</sup> Torsunov, "To Be a Woman," *Yoga Journal*, 26 January 2010, <https://yogajournal.ru/conscious/people/byt-zhenshchinoy/>.

<sup>85</sup> On Prabhupada's approach to the Vedas, see Fahy, "Constructive Ambiguity," 236. In Russian, the word *veda* invokes words like *vedat'* ("to know"), and *vedun* ("wizard").

- <sup>86</sup> Oleg Zaev, “Psihologiiia tretiego tysiacheletiiia’ ili ‘Troianskii kon’ krishnaitov,” *Ansobor.ru*, 15 April 2015, [http://www.ansobor.ru/news.php?news\\_id=5681\[defunct\]](http://www.ansobor.ru/news.php?news_id=5681[defunct]).
- <sup>87</sup> Meera Nanda, *Prophets Facing Backward: Postmodern Critiques of Science and Hindu Nationalism in India* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 107–08.
- <sup>88</sup> For example, the portal *K Istine* routinely reprints articles from non-Christian webpages.
- <sup>89</sup> “O Torsunove,” *Goloka*, 21 December 2012, <http://goloka.org.ua/viewtopic.php?t=5310>.
- <sup>90</sup> The author has gone to great lengths to remain anonymous, and I respect their decision by omitting citations.
- <sup>91</sup> Roman Zharkov, “Vedicheskie Manipuliatcii,” *Roman Zharkov*, 3 November 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCsiyutjTN5zREHgDqHW0VXQ>.
- <sup>92</sup> *Otzovik.com*, 2013.
- <sup>93</sup> For example, Sergei Amalanov, “Torsunov Oleg Gennadievich, polnaia biografiia,” *Amalan.ru*, 5 May 2014, <https://amalan.ru/torsunov-oleg-gennadievich-biografiya.html>.
- <sup>94</sup> Torsunov, “Kak nachat’ legko zhit’ v svoej strane. Ochen’ korotkii sovet,” *Torsunov Oleg Gennadievich*, 9 July 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zg-vDVcOVJU>.
- <sup>95</sup> “Konspekt lektcii Olega Torsunova ‘Kak vdokhnovliat’ muzhchinu. Supermetod,” Faza Rosta, <https://fazarosta.com/konspekt-lekcii-olega-torsunova-kak-vdohnovljat-muzhchinu-supermetod/>, accessed 15 August 2020.
- <sup>96</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 374. In this section I focus on personal charisma, although I agree with Lewis that this quality can also be attributed to science and tradition. See Lewis, “How Religions Appeal,” 25.
- <sup>97</sup> Catherine Wessinger, “Charismatic Leaders in New Religions,” in *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, eds. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 80–96, 81.
- <sup>98</sup> Lorne L. Dawson, “Psychopathologies and the Attribution of Charisma: A Critical Introduction to the Psychology of Charisma and the Explanation of Violence in New Religious Movements,” *Nova Religio* 10, no. 2 (2006): 3–28, 16.
- <sup>99</sup> Lorne L. Dawson, “Psychopathologies,” 6.
- <sup>100</sup> “Torsunov O.G. rasskazyvaet”; “O.G. Torsunov & ko.”
- <sup>101</sup> Honey, “Transforming Selves and Society,” 123.
- <sup>102</sup> Torsunov, “Kak poniat’ – chto mne Bog daet.”
- <sup>103</sup> Dawson, “Psychopathologies,” 20.
- <sup>104</sup> On John de Ruiter’s use of this strategy, see Paul Joosse, “The Presentation of the Charismatic Self in Everyday Life: Reflections on a Canadian New Religious Movement,” *Sociology of Religion* 73, no. 2 (2012): 174–199.
- <sup>105</sup> Olga Valyaeva, “Oleg Gennadievich Torsunov,” *Valyaeva.ru*, 15 August 2011, <https://valyaeva.ru/moi-uchitelya/oleg-torsunov/>.
- <sup>106</sup> Torsunov, Lecture in Dubna. Audio recording of lecture, Dubna, 23 January 2010, <https://audioveda.ru/audios/945>.

<sup>107</sup> Torsunov, “Raskrytie svoego prednaznacheniiia.” Audio recording of lecture, Riga, 1 December 2008, <https://audioveda.ru/audios/2401>.

<sup>108</sup> Robin R. Wallis, “The Social Construction of Charisma,” *Social Compass* 29, no.1 (1982): 25–39, 38.

<sup>109</sup> “Kak otositi’sia k prodazhe znaniia brahmanami?” *Forum.Krishna.ru*, 15 November 2012, <http://www.forum.krishna.ru/showthread.php?t=6532>.

<sup>110</sup> There were complaints about alcohol and tobacco consumption, sexual harassment, and the absence of *sankirtan* (public worship).

<sup>111</sup> “Ekspertnoe zakliuchenie o meditsinskoj praktike Torsunova Olega Gennadievicha (Audarya Dhama pr.),” *Protorsunova*, 19 November 2013, <https://protorsunova.livejournal.com/1015.html>.

<sup>112</sup> “Obraschenie v Natsional’nyi Sovet ROSK po povodu deiatel’nosti Shrimana Audarya Dhamy prabhu,” *Protorsunova*, 19 November 2013, <https://protorsunova.livejournal.com/761.html>.

<sup>113</sup> “Reshenie IK NS v sviazi s deiatel’nostiu Audrayi Dhamy Dasa,” *Forum.Krishna.ru*, 15 March 2013, <http://forum.krishna.ru/showthread.php?t=7525>.

<sup>114</sup> “Obraschenie Ispolnitel’nogo komiteta Natsional’nogo Soveta Rossiiskogo Obschestva soznaniia Krishny,” *Forum.Krishna.ru*, 10 June 2013, <http://forum.krishna.ru/showthread.php?t=7525>.

<sup>115</sup> For example, “Back to Krishna” ([https://vk.com/back\\_to\\_krishna](https://vk.com/back_to_krishna)) and “Doktor Torsunov: Mind, Honor and Conscience of the Era” ([https://vk.com/audarya\\_dhama](https://vk.com/audarya_dhama)), accessed 8 April 2020.

<sup>116</sup> “Krishnaity 28.”

<sup>117</sup> For example, *Feminity\_Freaks* at <https://feminity-freaks.livejournal.com/>.

<sup>118</sup> Snezhana Gribatskaya, “Vedy dlia zhenschin: legkii sposob pudrit’ nam mozgi,” *Cosmopolitan*, 25 August 2015, <https://www.cosmo.ru/psychology/psychology/vedicheskaya-zhenstvennost-legkiy-sposob-pudrit-nam-mozgi/>.

<sup>119</sup> Anna Kroitor, “Vedicheskaiia zhena: oborotnaia storona monety,” *Vesna-Taro.com*, 30 August 2013, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20130830041821/https://vesna-taro.ru/stati-ezoterika-psychologies/-vedicheskaja-zhena-lichnyi-opyt-i-oborotnaja-storona-monety.html>.

<sup>120</sup> Valyaeva’s online business makes her the family breadwinner, counter to Vedic Femininity teachings. See Gribatskaya, “Vedy dlia zhenschin.”

<sup>121</sup> Elena Nizeenko, “‘Vedicheskaiia zhenschina’: Mif, spekuliatitsiia ili lovushka patriarhata,” *Wonderzine*, 5 February 2016, <https://www.wonderzine.com/wonderzine/life/life/217007-sometimes-its-hard-to-be-a-woman>; Gribatskaya, “Vedy dlia zhenschin.”

<sup>122</sup> Ekaterina Bezymiannaia, “Terpi! I moi posudu,” *Prostitutka\_ket*, 7 December 2014, <https://prostitutka-ket.livejournal.com/162355.html>.

<sup>123</sup> Evgeniya Zadrutskaya, *Slushai Dushu*, 8 February 2015, <http://listentosoul.ru/>.

<sup>124</sup> Darya Kyoln, “Vedy razrushili moi brak’: chetyre istorii o poiskah zhenstvennosti,” *Gazeta Kemerova*, 20 March 2018, <https://gazeta.a42.ru/lenta/articles/vedy-razrushili-moj-brak-chetyre-istorii-o-poiskah-zhenstven>; “Darya Aleksandrovna,” “Pochti dokumental’nyi rasskaz o tom, kak ia pytalas’ stat’

zhenshinoi s bol'shoi Zh," *Russian Language for Us*, 16 September 2013, <https://rusforum.ru/viewtopic.php?t=7420>.

<sup>125</sup> Lena Malaa, "Baby, prishlo vremia stanovit'sia zhenshinami," *Lena-malaa*, 9 March 2017, <https://lena-malaa.livejournal.com/133494.html>.

<sup>126</sup> "Tsarstvo zhenshin," *Vk.com*, 28 April 2015, <https://vk.com/carstvozhenshin>.

<sup>127</sup> Gribatskaya, "Vedy dlia zhenshin"; Alina Charova, "Zhest' treningov dlia zhenshin," *Alina Charova*, 29 January 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlpwGsosHMI>.

<sup>128</sup> Olga Valyaeva, "Stoit li stremit'sia k obrazu 'vedicheskoi zhenshiny'?" *Valyaeva.ru*, 6 March 2015, <https://valyaeva.ru/stoit-li-stremitsya-k-obrazu-vedicheskoi-zhenshiny/>.

<sup>129</sup> I thank Anastasiya Astapova for pointing this out.

<sup>130</sup> Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions*, 155.

<sup>131</sup> "Torsunov obiaevliaet voinu 'kritikanam' i prizyvaet bit' im litsa, unichtozhat' ih," 11 November 2018, [https://vk.com/video403429195\\_456239269](https://vk.com/video403429195_456239269).

<sup>132</sup> "Otzyvy."