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The book addresses Russian intellectual sects which came to influence social consciousness in the 1970's and 80's. Among them there are those groups who, for example, worship Alexander Pushkin as a cult figure, or sanctify food as a source of divine energy and illumination, or those who consecrate themselves to the Russian earth as the receptacle of the blood of the innumerable martyrs and victims of Russian history. The book presents seventeen types of religious orientation supported by various undercurrents of philosophical thought. Special attention is paid to an unusual and paradoxical combination of religious and atheistic outlooks, which corresponds approximately to the protestant conception "God is Dead" which spread throughout Germany and the United States during the 1960's and 70's. Another feature of this new sectarianism is its gravitation to mundane reality, such as handmade objects or household items which are sanctified as revelations of a truer and higher being in opposition to the false realm of social ideologies and artificial signs.

Several of these sectarian movements have an eschatological orientation, inventing some means for humanity to save itself in the future nuclear apocalypse, or extolling vast Russian plains and emptiness as an entry into superhistorical, supertemporal reality. These new sects turn inside-out some generally accepted values, in a carnivallistic manner, reminiscent of the parodia sacra of the Middle Ages; for example, God is believed to reside in ordinary things or in human flesh, the rejection of God is reinterpreted as an expression of true faith, and so forth.

The book explores the logic and origins of new religious ideas and their relationship with the motifs of Holy Scripture and with the historical fates of Russia. New trends of religious thought are presented as a unique ideological phenomenon of contemporary Russian "post-atheistic" society. At this stage, Russian society has already overcome its atheistic bias but is still uncertain about the meaning and value of its religious traditions (Orthodox Christianity), and is thus preoccupied with the creation of new cults and deities.
The book of Mikhail Epstein New Sects: The Varieties of Religious-Philosophical Consciousness in Russia (1970's - 1980's) (in Russian original: Novoe sektantstvo: tipy religiozn-filosofskikh umonastroenii v Rossii, 1970-e - 1980-e gody) covers a broad spectrum of religious ideas in Russia of 1970's - early 1980's. This is a kind of "summa theologica" of the late communist society. The book is distinctive in its mode of writing because it represents the author's views only in the preface and in the postscript, while all other parts are written from the viewpoints of numerous prophets, ideologists, seers, and preachers who are ubiquitous on the contemporary Russian intellectual scene. The book includes fragments of their writings which, though composed by the author, represent the most typical beliefs and extremist opinions of new Russian sectarianism.

According to the author's device, the handbook New Sectarianism was published in 1985 with the "limited circulation" imprint of the Institute of Atheism in Moscow. For the first time, the existence of some underground sects, which arose not in the feudal or bourgeois periods but on socialist soil, was announced. Special expeditions investigated the religious and secular beliefs in different regions of the country, and some fragments of the collected materials are presented in this book. In fact, the author himself took part in such expeditions into the exploration of public opinions sponsored by Moscow State University in the mid 1980's, and some of his personal accounts of the bizarre views which were encountered on these trips are conveyed in the book, though in a fictionalized form. The author also headed several discussion clubs and intellectual associations in Moscow which offered him a good opportunity to generalize about the spiritual quest of Russian artistic and scientific intelligentsia.

The handbook has an introduction "New Sectarianism as a Problem of Religious Studies." A professor of atheism tries to review and criticize the modern sectarian movements in the Soviet Union that threaten ideological stability of the state and are hostile to the "scientific" world view. She points out such distinguishing traits of these new factions, or "versions" as she calls them, as more common appeal to the intelligentsia than to the uneducated, and religious humor, which makes some sectarian overstatements sound rather parodic (but never blasphemous) of canonical religious themes. Finally, the new sectarians use much more materialistic language and images than was traditionally accepted because they assume that "God speaks the language of things."

The main body of the book explores seventeen sects, ranging from those who sanctify food and hunger to those who prepare themselves for a nuclear holocaust. These sects are divided into six chapters according to their specific claims. Each chapter is preceded by a short introduction which is polemical in tone. Some names of the sects are Russian neologisms, for which approximate American equivalents are suggested.

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The first chapter is entitled "Sects of Everyday Life" where three factions are presented.

The first faction, "Food Worshippers" (pishchesviattsy), deals with the currently growing hardship in Russia and the specter of hunger haunting even "capitalists," inhabitants of the capital Moscow. This movement seems to be growing exponentially. They think that hunger is not just a physiological state, but a symbol of the highest thirst which cannot be satisfied in this worldly life. A man must remain hungry because it is precisely hunger which makes him human. An animal can eat its fill, but the fact that man is doomed to hunger is his higher destination. In wealthy countries people invent sophisticated devices to make themselves retain a bit of hunger. Hunger comes naturally from the humility of Russian nature itself, however, through the incorporation of Christ's craving for heavenly food. Hunger is the Cross in the depths of our flesh. An expression of hunger may be disgusting but satiation is even more repugnant. Various eating patterns are discussed in this section and eating is proclaimed to be the "physiology of revelation" as it combines the human incompleteness with divine abundance.

The second section discusses 'The Domesticans' (domovitiane). When the collapse of society is imminent and all streets and squares are teeming with human hostility, the only place which remains faithful to a man is his own home. Domesticans not only worship their houses or apartments, but try to transform them into all-comprehensive systems of life. A home combines the functions of a library, a school, an exhibition hall, a political club, a storehouse, and a scientific laboratory. Domesticans stand up for "common sense" and "mediocrity" which they view as a foundation for wise and holy pastimes. Soviet ideologists always persecuted these home lovers and accused them of narrow-mindedness. However internationalist broad-mindedness drove Soviet civilization to a dead end, for it demonstrated greater empathy towards African blacks than for its native citizens. Domesticans are proud that Russia was the first country which in resisting the aggressive forces of communism tried this new path to all-embracing domesticity. The great transition from primordial barbarism to modern civilization proceeded through the domestication of wild animals; the imminent challenge of future "post-civilization" is the domestication of technology, industry, and politics. Like nature, civilization itself must also be domesticated, assimilated, and compressed into the inner home space. This transition of civilization to our living quarters constitutes a whole epoch of secondary domestication.

The third faction, "Matterists" (veshchesviattsy), worships material things as opposed to "deceptive" signs because the former are exactly what they appear. These thing worshippers are opposed to official Soviet materialism because they believe in God, but think that the most divine manifestation in the world is a thing itself. Matterists follow the rule that man must live among hand-made things. They believe that in paradise all souls overcome their "sign-like" duality and acquire the pure being of a thing, which signifies nothing but itself. Giving an extreme importance to tactile art, matterists arrange exhibitions in darkened halls of works meant exclusively for touching, not seeing. They conduct rituals of sanctifying the tiniest things, such as grains of sand and hand made spoons, because these items are
as unique as God, are patient to all suffering, and are responsive to any need. According to matterism, a man must follow the path of things for they reveal the silent and humble wisdom of being.

The second chapter covers three conformist factions that are united by their willingness to conform to the most ordinary patterns of social life.

"Symples" (duriki) - these people are not simple in nature, but are symptomatic and symbolic simpletons in the framework of their social roles. One can meet such functionaries, who fail to fully achieve their job functions, in every Soviet institution. Symples do not understand what the system strives for and it is due to their simplicity that this super-sophisticated system of oppression does not succeed. When the intellect is superhuman, then it is stupidity which stands up to maintain humanity. Symples are foolish to the core - they are too sincere and hearty for those lofty rules which they must follow. They enjoy the "warm absurdity" which prevails in society because this absurdity is the ungovernable element in the cold system of total government. Hamlet, who seemed foolish for refusing to be played as an obedient flute, is one of their saints. These symples, in spite of their seeming isolation, work together against the System. Their non-efforts and non-abilities remain invisible, however, since it is the lack of connection and sequence which comprises their strength. Symples are not dissidents, nor saboteurs; they behave as conformists and simply cannot avoid minimal mistakes which transform the system into nonsense.

"Provs" (provy), an abbreviation for "provincials." This new style of life was invented and propagated by Moscow dandies who decided not to hide the provinciality of their dress and habits, but to overemphasize them. Felt boots and brand-new caps with earflaps bought in rural department stores became the chicest of Moscow fashions for the 1980s. The style "Cheap Splendor" is deliberately opposed to the "Luxurious Poverty" which was popular in the 1970s. Provs prefer dull earth tone colors for their clothes and enjoy dull pastimes. "We are mold of the Earth, we are a song of a mole" is a line of their song and a slogan of their culture.

"Grays" (serye), believe that it is their party, not the "reds," "whites," "browns," or "blacks" who gained the victory in the most important battles of human history. They determine their strategy as "the passive voice of history" whose accomplishments are made essentially not by winners, but by losers and martyrs, such as Jesus Christ. They reread and rewrite all history in the passive voice. The gray underlies all other garish colors, which tend to conceal the poor reality. So, the banner of this party is a piece of colorless canvas which betrays the unvarnished truth of defeat. "One will hardly find a foundation more pure than the truth of the fresh canvas," wrote our poet, Osip Mandelshtam, by whose blood you painted your banner" - this is what grays have to say to reds.

The next three sects are united by their nationalist aspirations, the first on behalf of the Russians, the second on behalf of the Eastern Turkish peoples, and the third on behalf of the Jews.

"Blood Worshippers" (krovosviatsy). The ritual of worshipping places where the most blood was shed remained popular under the Soviet regime. The blood
worshippers, as distinct from official patriots, believe it is necessary to add your own blood to that of your heroic predecessors to become related by blood with all humanity which rests in the graves. Their banners are pure red without signs of the hammer and sickle; an initiate gives a drop of his own blood for the banner. Among blood worshippers both Christian and pagan movements are found. Both of them worship primarily the Russian earth because it has absorbed the most abundant streams of blood during the course of human history. The ritual of blood giving is traced from the “third baptism” which is referred to in John’s First Epistle (5, 6-8) and is considered holier than the baptism by water. This is why Russia, the country which went through a bloody baptism in all its violent self-extirmination of 60 million people, lays claim to the most sacred earth in the world.

"The Red Horde" (krasnoordyntsy). The followers of this group believe that the victory of the October Revolution signified the dominance of the Eastern element in Russian statehood. The Tatar-Mongol Horde changed its color from "golden" to red, but the nomadic military spirit and the idea of equality taken from the plain earth of the Mongolian steppes remain the same. Lenin, whose ancestors came from Astrakhan, is a descendant of Genghis Khan, not only by blood and by appearance but by the essence of his aggressive dominance. The military spirit of the steppes gained victory over the spirit of the peaceful Russian forests. The current collapse of the Russian empire means that the Eastern Turkish peoples will dominate the vast territories of Eurasia through explosive population growth. Russia’s defeats in two Asian battles - with Japan in 1904 and with Afghanistan in the 1980s - were landmarks of the growing Asian dominance over Slavic peoples. The members of the Red Horde reinterpret Marx, believing that he predicted that the "Asian mode of production," which he implicitly identified with communism, will prevail in the future.

"Khazarians" (khazanane). The multi-national Khazar state dominated what is now Russian territory from the eighth through the tenth centuries. Its official faith was Judaism and this Volga Rus kaganate, the greatest Judaic state since the destruction of the ancient Temple, was the first direct antecedent of the Kievan state. The modern Khazarians believe that the legacy of the ancient Khazars had a crucial influence on the cultural and religious development of Russia. Now that the Russian empire is in decay, Russia must go back to its monotheistic foundations, when the Muslims and Christians were united peacefully under Judaism. A "Vision of Svyatoslav" is popular among Khazarians. In this document the kagan, defeated by the Russian prince, presents him with his golden crown in the form of a Jewish six pointed star. "Russians who destroyed our kaganate will establish it in their hearts and restore it in the future." Khazarians believe that a Soviet five pointed star is only a presage of the six pointed star, which soon will be established as a state emblem. The official explanation will be that not five, but six continents including Antarctica, constitute the brotherhood of all peoples. Khazarians attend services of all religions and celebrate the three days from Friday through Sunday as their holidays, though Saturday has the most significance for them. Regarding Judaism as the mother of all faiths and the symbol of their future reunification rather than as a national faith, Khazarians remain distinct from Judaists.
The fourth chapter is devoted to **atheistic sects**. All of them are based on the mass atheism which was dominant in the Soviet Union for seventy years, but reinterpret this atheism in mystical and religious ways.

"**Neoatheists**" (*afeiane*) consider themselves to be the true atheists; traditional atheists are only anti-theists because they simply deny God’s existence. True atheism is non-believing as a mode of belief. A man must not rely on God’s existence for the afterlife, but this makes the conduct of his present life even more generous and high-minded. Neoatheists refer to Pascal’s famous wager, but argue that to proceed from nonexistence of heavenly rewards is even more profitable than to rely on them. If a good job is done only because a reward is expected, then it is not a truly divine job. Any profit, even spiritual, diminishes the meaning of genuine faith. For them, atheism is a selfless devotion to God without confidence that God really exists. God often endows the best talents with those people who do not believe in him and vice-versa, many people do good deeds without believing. God and faith are two generosities which do not need each other.

"**Good Believers**" (*dobrovertsy*) reject all systems of good which existed before, such as Christianity, Buddhism, Marxism, and Liberalism. Good which is arranged as a system has brought the greatest evil to humanity. They believe that all parties, unions and organizations which were founded to serve good ended up serving evil. Genuine good can be only nonsystematic, random, or arbitrary. One of the factions, the so-called "anonymous helpers" (*pomozhentsy*), assists others while remaining unknown to give people the opportunity to decline their help. Good must be combined with full freedom. Good Believers hold that full freedom is a special Russian path to sanctity because in the West, capitalism embraces not only material but spiritual and religious attitudes. Westerners believe in the rewards of the afterlife, so their good deeds are investments which reap dividends later on. The Russian man has accumulated no goods either in the worldly or in the transcendent life and thus does good only for its own sake.

"**Sinnerists**" (*grekhovniki*). They sin not because they are opposed to God, but because they want to please Him and to take on other people’s sins in their souls. They cite from the Gospel that "there is no greater love than this, that a man should lay down his soul for his friends" (John, 15, 13). Whoever wants to be with Christ must take leave of righteous men and immerse himself with sinners, enduring the burden of their sins. This is the religious sense of revolution; inside underground revolutionary groups of czarist Russia existed the most conspiratorial group which was called "Hell." They knew that their souls would go to hell after all the crimes they committed, but this meant going with Christ: not only to ascend to Golgotha, but to descend to hell and to be tortured because of a love for humanity. The sinnerists proclaim that after the New Testament, two other Testaments must be established - one for the Holy Spirit, as predicted by Russian idealist thinkers such as Soloviev, Merezhkovsky, and Berdiaev; and the other as Hell’s Testament for Russian Narodniki, terrorists, social revolutionaries, and Bolsheviks. Russia had to fulfill this Hell’s Testament and deliberately go through the greatest sins and suffering in history to deserve the blessing of the Holy Spirit, which is now approaching.
The fifth chapter covers the doomsday sects who wait and prepare for the end of the world.

"Arkists" (kovchezhniki). They adopted Noah as their example although they are waiting for a terrible conflagration, not for a flood. The ark is the womb of the Earth from which mankind will be born again. The specificity of this new punishment is that it will be sent not directly from God, but arranged by man himself in his preparations for a nuclear holocaust. This means that the ark must be built not according to God's direct orders, but by the will and device of man himself. The arkists leave large cities and settle as far as possible from areas of possible military conflict devoting all their lives to the building of protective shelters. Some of them have already died and the bunkers became their graves, but their followers are certain that this is only the beginning of work which must last for centuries.

"Retreaters" or the "Trash Men" (udalentsy or musorshchiki) turn their backs on the sunset of traditional religions to face the rising God of doomsday. They are waiting for God's arrival in the most remote and god-forsaken parts of the world. In the 1920s and 1930s, many of them emigrated to Russia, presumably the most anti-religious country. After some of them were exiled to Siberia, most of the other retreaters followed them thinking that it was God's hand that would lead them to the heart of darkness. Usually they choose professions such as trash collectors, sewer workers, janitors, shoe shine men, or caretakers for the severely ill. As God will come to the darkest place in the world, so the smoking heap of garbage is the sacrificial alter on which God's spirit descends. They believe that this slow putrefaction which is history will pass into the furious fire of the apocalypse. The bonfires in which the garbage is heaped constitute the center of their rituals, during which they remove articles of their clothing and throw them into the fire.

"Seekers of Emptiness" (pustovertsy). Their key words are "breadth," "steppe," and "plain." "Remember you live on the plains, so let the plains live in you." The breadth unites people while height and depth disconnect them. The plains are the most open and mysterious place on the Earth because they contain no particular secrets. The great Russian plain and the steppes which surround it from the South constitute a natural place for the meditations and mystical experiences. Drunkenness is a spiritual illness of the Russian soul which hates the slow pace of everyday life and aspires to doomsday. It can be cured only by speeding over the expanse of the Russian plains where history ends and the infinity of afterlife begins. Russia is the motherland of emptiness. Thus all ingenious spirits from the whole Earth are now aspiring to Russia's wide open spaces which inspire the will for creation. Some rituals for averting the emptiness and for merging with it are described in this section.

"Glaziers," or "Glassars" (steklovodtsy). While the secret brotherhood of Masons has achieved great publicity, almost nothing is known about their counterparts, the glaziers, because their work is intended to remain invisible. As distinct from Masons, who tried to construct the temple of human brotherhood from massive stones, the glaziers try to purify the existing world and to transform it into a transparent temple. "In stone, the Earth sends its weight to the sky, while in glass, the sky lends its transparency to the Earth." The terms "glazier" or "glassar"
here indicate not just one who works with glass, but someone who is himself
transparent and whose cardinal rule is "to be and not to hide the essence of being." Communicating with such a man is like communicating with your own soul. Glaziers believe glass is more valuable than precious stones, which reflect the light but do not transmit it. Finally, glass is the final outcome of the earth when it will become fully transparent for heavenly light, as in the Biblical vision of heavenly Jerusalem. "...The city itself was of pure gold, bright as clear glass" (Revelation, 21,18).

The last sect consists of the literary "Pushkinites" (pushkininantsy), not those who study the greatest Russian poet Alexander Pushkin (1799 - 1837) but those who worship him as a deity. Indeed, this was such a popular cult in Russia during the 1970s and 1980s that it knew no parallels in the West's attitudes towards its literary geniuses. One could read in the Soviet press that "Pushkin is similar to God - he was destined to become the unifying foundation for all peoples. We look at the world through Pushkin's eyes - he is the father of our souls." Pushkin became a sort of national Christ and Dionysus at the same time. Young Pushkin is regarded as a god of spring, of wine, and of sensual aesthetic pleasures. Pushkin in his later years is worshipped as a god of autumn, inspiring humility and sobriety. The cause for this worship of Pushkin is that he combines the qualities of pagan and Christian spirituality, satisfying both the atheists and the Orthodox believers. The fact that Pushkin died three days after he was fatally wounded was regarded as a Christ-like spiritual resurrection.

After the handbook of new sects got publicity under glasnost, some reviews appeared in the international press. The fragments of four reviews comprise the APPENDIX of the book. They dwell on the sectarian character of all Russian intellectual life which is brightly confirmed by the epoch of glasnost. One of the authors, Pierre Daniel, entitled his review "The First Socialist Philosophy" and identified this handbook as the first genuine manifestation of collective thinking, unlike the individualistic writings of Marx or Lenin. The Bolsheviks failed to build a socialism with a human face, but something more genuine and terrifying grew from the Russian soul - socialism with a divine face, which of course is contrary to any Christian conception of socialism.

What does this handbook want to say? Like every dictionary, it does not have its own opinion; everyone speaks through it but on its own it is mute. This is the silence of thousands of utterances which dissolve and disappear within each other, the silence of the Word through thousands of spoken words. In the same way, God is silent with us. Such is the great silence of the society, which remains socialist in its depth, in spite of all surface capitalist trends. This is the way for the unhappy and split religious consciousness to achieve its own wholeness, the way for sects to comprise a single comprehensive religion of the future.

In the POSTSCRIPT, the author explains why abstract conceptions have made such a decisive imprint on the history of the 20th century. One possible aftermath of totalitarian ideology is the proliferation of multiple ideologies, which nevertheless
remain totalitarian in their particular fields. Such is the situation in the former Soviet Union now: dozens of totalitarianisms can not make up for a single pluralism.

The author shows how the **tragedy of people** who are bound to suffer and die for ideas' sake turns out to be the **comedy of ideas** which ironically contradict their own bright promises. The comedy of ideas is the reverse side of what Solzhenitsyn's "Gulag Archipelago" conveyed as the tragedy of individuals. Ideas need not be perceived as kings in the court of history, they can also be jesters.

Paul Valery, perhaps the greatest French poet and essayist of the 20th century, once said that after Dante's Divine Comedy and Balzac's Human Comedy, it is time to start a third, Intellectual Comedy which would treat the adventures of human thought. However, it is only in the so-called socialist society, which was born from the minds of its theoreticians, that ideas had really become the moving force of people's actions. The comical element of socialism is the kingdom of self-contained ideas, which humiliate and ridicule the individual who tries to implement them. This is especially topical now that the country has rejected communist ideology and has become a captive of numerous ideologies which spring up as quickly as material reality plunges into nothingness. There is nothing to eat, but there are hundreds of witty ideas about how to feed the country.

This growing sense of irony is why the author, who himself participated in the Soviet intellectual carnival in 1970's - 1980's, dares to follow the great tradition in suggesting his own version of the modern comedy of ideas. He also explains why the Divine Comedy took the form of a poem, the Human Comedy took the form of novels, while the Comedy of Ideas should be designed in the form of an encyclopedia, or dictionary, or handbook.