

---

# INTERPRETATION OF RELIGIOUS PLOTS IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY RUSSIAN MUSIC AND VISUAL ARTS

**Ekaterina M. Akishina<sup>\*</sup>, Igor M. Krasilnikov and Elena S. Medkova**

*Institute of Art Education and Cultural studies of the Russian Academy of Education,  
Federal State Budgetary Scientific Institution, Pogodinskaya Ulitsa 8/1, 119121, Moscow, Russia*

(Received 13 November 2016, revised 16 February 2017)

---

## **Abstract**

Attitudes towards religious symbolism and use of biblical stories in 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian music and visual arts are extremely contradictory. Despite a long period of rejection, oblivion and prohibition, religious discourse held an important place in the works of many 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian artists and composers. The present article gives a short description of some of the well-known artistic works, which reflect biblical symbolism in one way or another. These works are arranged into a number of groups: canon ecclesiastical art, secular art based on biblical topics, art drawing only occasionally on religious symbols and inverse interpretation of religious plots.

*Keywords:* religious symbolism, music, visual arts, biblical topics, canon

---

## **1. Introduction**

### ***1.1. Area of research***

Given the limited framework of this article, we shall discuss the uses of religious plots in Russian (Soviet and post-Soviet) art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These plots are limited to Christianity, or, more precisely, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which is traditional for Russian culture. The present article focuses on religious plots rather than on religious art, since religious art as a whole lost its dominant positions in Russian art during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Religious topics in visual arts and music include biblical stories (Old and New Testament), which have acquired the status as a symbol in the context of modern art.

### ***1.2. The role of religious discourse in art***

Russian and Soviet art historians and educators perceived religious art as one of the means of moral and esthetical education through catharsis. According to V.V. Medushevsky, "Religious art captures states of prayer, and church music

---

<sup>\*</sup>E-mail: eka53.170@gmail.com

is the music of prayer. Icons capture moments of devout sobriety, of spiritual concentration, of silence of the soul and of unattainable love and peace.” [1] P.A. Florensky states that “The most convincing out of all the philosophical proofs of God’s existence is the one that is not even mentioned in textbooks. It can be summed up by the following reasoning: ‘There exists Rublev’s Trinity, therefore, there is God’.” [2] In the monograph on the painting by A.A. Ivanov, entitled ‘Appearance of Christ to People’, which played a very important role in the understanding of Russia’s destinies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, M.M. Allenov mentions the ‘life-structuring’ role of Bible-centred art. He highlights the fact that the artist interpreted his work depicting the meeting of Christ with people as a form of art that “aspired to transform life” [3].

### ***1.3. Subject matter***

The 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian history is very complicated and contradictory as far as religious art and religious plots in art are concerned. At the turn of the century, Russian society was marked by intense search for God. The Russian Revolution and seventy years of Soviet power led to total rejection of the religion itself and everything that is related to it in art. From 1991 on, after the emergence of the Russian Federation, the country has pursued a policy of restoring traditional values and sponsored construction of Orthodox churches (Moscow Orthodox Churches Construction Program, 2010). The present article aims, thus, to bring to light various aspects of religious discourse in 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian visual arts and music and to discuss their relevance in society at present and in the future.

## **2. Methodology**

### ***2.1. Description of research materials***

Our research of various aspects of religious discourse in 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian visual arts and music is based on art history (formal and stylistic analysis, iconography, iconology) and semiotics research methods. The following forms of religious discourse have been highlighted in 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian visual arts and music.

### ***2.2. Canonical iconography and music***

Are the integral parts of church space, are derived from the medieval tradition. While the medieval tradition of church frescoes and icon-painting had survived by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a profound lack of new talented artists. During the Soviet times, only conservators-restorers contributed to the functioning of picturesque church complexes. From the 1990s on, the rapid growth of Orthodox Church construction led to the restoration of icon-painting workshops at the monasteries and churches, where artists strictly adhere

to canonical norms established by Andrei Rublev and Dionysius. Some examples include the works by A. Eiteneyer: *Our Lady of Jerusalem*, *Our Lady of Filippov*, *Our Lady of the Way*.

Orthodox canonical music is also mainly oriented towards church service, although its constraints had not impeded the composers' creative endeavours, which gave rise to the 'new Russian' style in liturgical chant in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This style combined the archaic Znamenny, or plain, chant with background singing dating back to Russian folk songs. The works of the leading Synodal composers, such as P.G. Chesnokov (1877-1944), A.D. Kastalsky (1856-1926), A.V. Nikolsky (1874-1942), M.M. Ippolitov-Ivanov (1859-1935), A.T. Grechaninov (1864-1956) and B.M. Ledkovsky both are closely based on the Church canon and have a high artistic merit. In this regard, of particular importance is Sergei Rachmaninoff's (1873-1943) *All-Night Vigil*, written in 1915, which not only continues to be performed in churches today, but also has become part of the philharmonic repertory.

The fashion for paintings centred on biblical plots dates back to the period of reforms undertaken by Peter the Great in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and to the introduction of European Renaissance, Baroque, Classicism and Academism art to Russian culture, where religious discourse in visual arts raised philosophical and existential issues and started a search for timeless moral and esthetical life-structuring ideals providing insights into the present and the future. In Russian art history, the huge painting by A.A. Ivanov *Appearance of Christ to People* set a model for all Russian artists, as it raised the issue of whether the humanity was ready for historical and moral renewal and provided a great many choice and self-determination scenarios both for central figures in the painting and for the viewers. Philosophical traditions present in 20<sup>th</sup> century Bible-based painting in Russia reflect many stylistic directions. Thus, P.N. Filonov conveyed his vision of a harmonic future, based on the wholeness and 'analytical art' principles, in his idyllic paintings *The Family (The Holy Family)* and *The Flight into Egypt*. K.S. Petrov-Vodkin implemented icon-painting stylistic elements into a modern subject topic in his painting *Madonna of Petrograd* to render the dramatic nature and timeless value of the Holy Virgin's image. S.M. Romanovich gave a new meaning to such eternal themes as *Kiss of Judas* and *Deposition of Christ* through his original use of colours. The academic painter I.S. Glazunov explored the issue of Christ's solitude in the crowd (*Crucify him*) and in private with his disciple (*Kiss of Judas*).

The use of biblical themes by secular painters has its counterpart in music, more specifically, in the church concert genre. In their works, composers comply with biblical themes and the simple and strict church music style and, at the same time, strive to stimulate emotional experience among the listeners. Among such musical compositions are the already mentioned Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil*, his *Liturgy* (1910) and the works by A. Pyart (b. 1935) – *The Virgin Mary* (1990), *Silvanus's Song* (1991), *Magnificat* (1993), *Canon of Repentance* (1997) – and those of V.I. Martynov (b. 1946), notably *Apocalypse* (1991) and *Jeremiah's Lament* (1992). While following in the 'New Russian' tradition in

his compositions, A. Pyart employs the repeated melodic phrase technique, which derives from Orthodox prayers. He also uses the unique ‘tintinnabuli’ technique (Latin *tintinnabulum*, bell, jingle), which allows to create musical structures reminiscent of the chime of bells during the priest’s censuring ceremony [4]. V.I. Martynov shows an inclination for minimalism and uses mathematical calculation and polyphonic techniques when unfolding the musical pattern, which has its counterpart in medieval church music [2, p. 80-81]. As a result, spiritual texts are set in musical form, in which centuries-old traditions and modern stylistic trends are closely intertwined.

### **2.3. Paintings drawing occasionally on religious symbolism**

As a mark of fidelity to ethnic and religious historical traditions first appeared in V.I. Surikov’s works (*The Conquest of Siberia by Yermak Timofeyevich, Menshikov in Berezov*). In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, M.V. Nesterov worked in this direction in search for the Russian national identity through embracement of the articles of faith: *The Vision to the Youth Bartholomew, Holy Rus, In Rus (The Soul of the People)*. B.M. Kustodiev also interpreted the coming of the Revolution through the articles of faith (*The Bolshevik*). Marc Chagal used Christian symbolism in his mystical puzzle about national destinies (*Russia. Asses and Others*). This trend reached its peak during the Second World War, the period of patriotic uplift in Russia, as evidenced by the majestic image of the saint warrior Alexander Nevsky against the background of a banner depicting Jesus Christ Pantocrator in P.D. Korin’s triptych *Northern Ballad, Alexander Nevsky and Ancient Legend*. War memories of the next generation of painters, such as V.E. Popkov, also abound in Christian symbolism: *Silence, May Day, Widows of Mezen*.

Drawing on religious symbolism in music compositions is typical of many Soviet and modern Russian composers. In particular, *Chants and Prayers*, composed by Georgy V. Sviridov (1985-1997) and also known as *From Liturgical Poetry*, are of both secular and spiritual nature in their form and content, respectively, and clearly reflect the Christian Orthodox background of Russian music. Some music compositions of Y.M. Butsko (1938-2015) are full of religious symbolism: *The Second* (1972) and *the Fourth Symphonies* (1986), *the Second Cello Concerto* (Ricercar, 1979). In particular, this entails the idea of the Cross acquiring a wider significance as an article of faith and the Znamenny, or plain, chant symbolizing the notions of all-encompassing unity and conciliarity. “The idea of the Cross is central to all my works”, says Butsko [5]. The Znamenny chant is also present in many compositions by R.K. Shchedrin (b. 1932) either as intonation melodic phrases or as large-scale stylizations, for instance, in the play entitled *The Znamenny Chant* from his piano cycle *Album for the Youth* (1981) or his orchestral works *Self-Portrait* (1984) and *Chimes* (1968). S.A. Gubaidullina (b. 1931) also composes music containing religious symbols: *Seven Words by Jesus* (1982), *Alleluia* (1990), *Saint John Chrysostom’s Easter Sermon* (2001), among others, while the artistic work is

represented by the composer as a crucifix: “The vertical line of the multidimensional Divine meaning is to be crossed by the horizontal line of time in order to achieve unity” [6].

#### **2.4. The inverse interpretation of religious plots**

The inverse interpretation of religious plots emerged at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The crisis in religious worldviews gave rise to the ‘shadow’ images in various interpretations of religious plots, such as the Black Mass. The scene caricaturing the Last Supper, as represented in the picture *The Kings’ Feast* by P.N. Filonov, can only be described as the black mass celebrated by the monsters. The contemporary painter N.I. Nesterova also interprets *The Last Supper* scene as an ominous and, at the same time, tragic masquerade. The tradition of depicting the ‘Black Icon’ was established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by K.S. Malevich when he painted his famous *Black Square*. E.V. Maltseva continued this trend in her work *Icon I* in which she makes a negative interpretation of the icon *The Veil of Veronica*. Alexander Osin uses non-canonical versions to explain Judas’s behavior. The insertion of the Judas Kiss scene into the painting representing the Deisis and the Crucifixion refers to the versions, according to which Judas acted by the will of God (Anatole France, Jorge L. Borges) or fulfilled the wish of Jesus himself (José Saramago). The fusion of both figures against the backdrop of the glowing sun reproduces the farewell scene of Pontius Pilate and Yeshua from the novel by Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*. The author insists on the endless mercy of Jesus who is capable to understand and forgive everything.

A typical example of the inverse interpretation of a religious plot in music can be the cantata by Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998) entitled *Historia von D. Johann Fauste* (1983). Based on a text by I. Spies (1587), this music composition represents, according to Schnittke, the anti-Holy Passion or the negative Passion of Christ. The distribution of parts corresponds to the Holy Passion genre: the Narrator (the Evangelist) is a tenor, Faust (Christ’s antagonist) is a basso, the chorus performs the role of a participant and a commentator, while Mephistopheles acts both as a ‘sweet-voiced seducer’ (male alto) and as a ‘cruel punisher’. Besides, Schnittke used a shocking stylistic contract to create the atmosphere of the hellhole: ‘A pop song, he says, is a good mask for every kind of devilry as it can enter any soul, that is why I consider pop music to be the best way of conveying evil in music.’

#### **2.5. Paintings with hidden religious undertones**

These have appeared as a response to anti-religious policy in the Soviet Union. K.S. Petrov-Vodkin, a passed-master of hidden meanings, was able to encode at a compositional level the theme of the Last Supper in the painting *Housewarming Party*. In his generalized social portrait *Female Worker*, Kazimir S. Malevich shows the unnatural nature of the Soviet Madonna who embraces

emptiness instead of a baby. V.I. Ivanov, in his painting *Café Greco* representing a collective portrait of painters, hints at the theme of self-sacrifice and at the words from a prayer “May this cup be taken from me”.

**Table 1.** Statistical data on the presence and prospective demand for works of art on religious themes in contemporary Russian art.

	How often do you come across religious themes in art in your cultural practices?	Do you want to see religious themes more often in your cultural practices?	Where do you come across religious art?	Which forms of religious themes in contemporary art have you met in your life?	Which forms of religious art do you consider most corresponding to the contemporary level of the philosophical interpretation of the world?	What is the role of religious art in the philosophical interpretation of the world?	Prospective Implementation on forms of religious themes	Significance of religious themes for the Russian national idea in modern art
	Often (%)	Yes (%)	Church (%)	Canonical icon-painting (%)	Canonical icon-painting (%)	Not relevant (%)	Canonical icon-painting (%)	Essence of national identity (%)
E	65	23	85	65	42	0	38	62
I	40	13	60	80	20	13	13	13
M	50	25	87.5	87.5	37.5	0	62.5	62.5
S	0	9.5	71	90.4	4.7	19	38	61.9
	Rarely (%)	No (%)	Museum/ Concert hall(%)	Paintings on biblical themes(%)	Paintings on biblical themes (%)	Significant role (%)	Paintings on biblical themes (%)	Loyalty to historical traditions (%)
E	34	11	73	77	38	42	38	58
I	53	54	73	80	20	7	13	40
M	50	37.5	87.5	50	25	25	37.5	50
S	95	38	57	66.(6)	33.(3)	33.(3)	28.5	28.5
	Not relevant (%)	Current level is satisfactory (%)	Exhibits (%)	Paintings with hidden religious meanings (%)	Paintings with hidden religious meanings (%)	Not significant (%)	Paintings with hidden religious meanings (%)	Represents the past only (%)
E	0	65	42	58	2	58	58	8
I	7	40	73	87	87	80	73	40
M	0	37.5	37.5	25	37.5	62.5	12.5	0
S	4.7	48	14	9.5	14	38	33.(3)	9.5
			Print media (%)	Inverse religious content (%)	Inverse religious content (%)		Inverse religious content (%)	
E			23	62	34		11	
I			27	67	54		80	
M			37.5	50	12.5		25	
S			14	9.5	9.5		19	
			Internet (%)	Occasionally drawing on religious symbolism (%)	Occasionally drawing on religious symbolism (%)		Occasionally drawing on religious symbolism (%)	
E			11	62	25		34	
I			40	87	73		84	
M			50	62.5	50		37.5	
S			28.5	38	28.5		23.8	

## **2.6. Methods for studying the viewers' opinions**

The methods are based on surveys and the assessment of the results obtained from four groups of respondents: experts (E), Internet audience (I), masters from art schools and teaching colleges (M) and senior high school students (S). The audience's distribution by age is as follows: experts - less than 40 years old, Internet audience - 30 years old, masters - 25 years old, senior high school students - 15-16 years old. A thousand respondents have been surveyed in Moscow and in Russian regions. The respondents' distribution by education level is as follows: experts - Ph.D. in Art History and Education, Internet audience - higher education, masters - undergraduate degrees, senior high school students - junior secondary education.

## **3. Results and discussion**

Table 1 summarizes the expert assessment of the current state of representing religious themes in contemporary Russian art.

On the whole, experts are satisfied, in quantitative terms, with the presence of religious discourse in art (65% often come across it, 65% are satisfied with its frequency). Students come across religious plots least of all [2, p. 96]. The audience is, on the whole, satisfied with the current level of religious presence in art (over 40%).

Religious discourse in art is present not only in churches (60% to 85%), but also in museums (73%), in exhibits (42%) and, to a lesser degree, in printed press and on the Internet.

The distribution of answers to the question 'Which forms of religious themes in contemporary art have you met in your cultural practices?' is as follows: 1<sup>st</sup> place: Canonical painting: from 65% (E) to 90% (S); 2<sup>nd</sup> place: Paintings on biblical themes: 77% (E), 80% (I), 67% (S), 50% (M).

The Internet audience is most sensitive to hidden meanings (87%), and students are least sensitive to it (9.5%).

Analysis of the survey results according to various criteria allows to select some of the most interesting qualities of perception. For example, sensitive to manifestations of inversion are 67% of respondents (I group), 62% (E group), and 50% (M group).

The criterion 'sensitivity to the unplanned presence of religious themes in art' is demonstrated by the answers of 87% of respondents (I group) and 62% (E and M groups).

It was found that the sensitivity to non-classical forms of religious subjects' realization can be shown in interest in hidden meanings of symbols (73%), and in understanding the role of inversion (80%).

It is interesting, that on the second place in the interest of the audience there are the canonical forms of biblical themes' realization (38%). Perhaps this is due to the fact that these are less dynamic.

Such a complex problem, as the perception of the religious discourse in terms of the Russian national idea and the reflection of national identity is revealed by the answers to questions that show that this problem is deeply understood by respondents. It is marked by 62.5% of respondents (M group), 62% (E group) and 61.9% (S group). It is significant that the group I took the last place in the evaluation of this criterion (13%). By the way, I group is the most pessimistic in assessing that religious themes are reflecting the history of the country (40%).

#### 4. Conclusions

In current practices, all uses of religious plots, which we have highlighted, are relevant to the viewers, attesting to the accurateness of our classification. The four religious plots mentioned in our article are almost equally present in modern art. It can therefore be concluded that information about art with religious themes is present in our sources of information.

There is no strong demand for an increase in religious elements in art.

There are divided views among the respondents with respect to the role of religious discourse in art. Prospective uses (viewers' commission) show audience preferences, which are paintings with hidden representations of religious themes. Canonical and biblical paintings, those with occasional presence of religious elements share the same positions. Inverse interpretation of religious plots is clearly unpopular among the respondents.

The research date attests the strong ties between religious symbols and Russia's national identity and traditions.

#### Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express their deep gratitude to the management of the Institute of Art Education and Cultural Studies of the Russian Academy of Education for their financial support of this research project, and to the Institute's staff members who served on the expert committee. We would also like to extend our thanks to Dr. Y.P. Olesina, Professor at the Moscow Pedagogical State University, and to her Bachelor students specializing in Religious studies. We also wish to thank the auditors of the Design and Computer Graphics School at the Moscow State University of Design and Technology, the students and teachers at Moscow's school No. 875 and Internet users throughout Russia for their participation in the survey.

#### References

- [1] V.V. Medushevsky, *Khristianizatsiya sovetskogo obrazovaniya (Christianization of Soviet Education)*, in *Russian school. Spiritual and moral problems of education*, Russian word, Moscow, 1996, 32-46.
- [2] P. Florensky, *Ikonoostas (Iconostasis)*, in *Selected Works on Art*, Russian book, Saint Petersburg, 1993, 14.



- [3] A.A. Allenov, *Aleksandr Andreyevich Ivanov: Monografia (Monography)*, Visual arts, Moscow, 1980, 143.
- [4] V.N. Grachyov, *Muzyka, in Perspektiva novogo stilya v khristianskoy traditsii (New Style Prospects in Christian Tradition)*, Research Library, Moscow, 2016, 344.
- [5] Y. Butsko, *Sovetskaya muzyka*, **8** (1970) 121-130.
- [6] V.N. Kholopova, *Sofia Gubaidulina, Composer*, Moscow, 2011, 64.