

# PERSONAL RELIGIOUSNESS AND RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG RUSSIAN ARTISTS AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY



In the 19th and 20th centuries, Russian society still regarded art as either a church or a pulpit from which sermons significant for all members of society were preached. Even today, actors, artists and literary people often say: “I serve art”. For them, the theatre, fine arts and all other forms of creativity are not just work, but service. This sacralisation of art is something peculiar perhaps to the Russian mentality.

This feature of Russians’ approach to art came markedly to the fore in the mid-19th century. At that time, society, the public and critics began to demand more than just “art for art’s sake” from literature and painting. The Russian *intelligentsia* was hungering for answers to the most fundamental questions of life and the spirit, the so-called “accursed questions”.

This situation was probably a result of the lack of political freedom and the reign of the censorial yoke in 19th- and 20th-century Russia. There were no channels for open discussion of the country’s burning social issues. Therefore, culture — literature, theatre, fine arts, and later cinema — took upon itself the role of church pulpit or orator’s platform, from which passionate declamations on the questions of the day could be delivered. These were received by the public as prophecies, as prayers, and as calls to action.

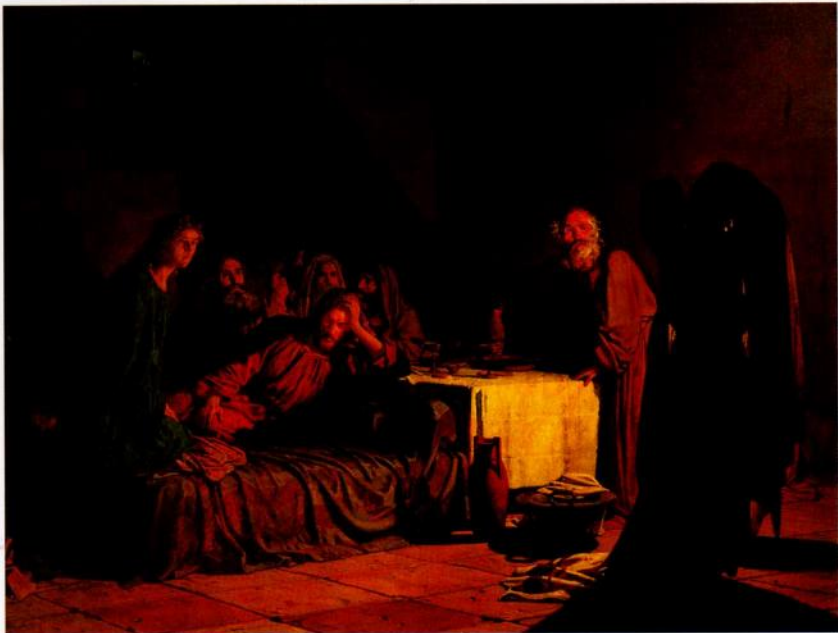
Various spheres of human consciousness became mixed up, each striving for universality and to replace the others. For example, after reading Leo Tolstoy’s treatise “What Is Art?”, Ilya Repin expressed his impressions of it in this fashion in a letter: “A religion has been found — this is the greatest event of our lives”.<sup>1</sup> In his essay, Tolstoy posited that art’s main and only task is the advocacy of moral virtue, considering art’s aesthetic side to be an inferior, or “lower” virtue, inaccessible to the masses of the people, who require simpler methods of moral education. One might be tempted to say that Tolstoy confused truth with beauty and morals with aesthetics; and Repin, morals with religion. However, neither of them confused anything. Tolstoy gave an extremely rigorous, principled and supra-aesthetic reinterpretation of art’s inherent essence, replacing beauty with virtue and the pleasure-giving function with an educational one. He construed art as simply one means of communicating with an audience, a means which the artist can fill with any content, in accordance with his will. This harsh dictate of pan-moralism espoused by Tolstoy in his later years was shared by many representatives of the Russian *intelligentsia*; behind it lies the basically religious imperative to subordinate all forms of human activity to the guideposts and norms of one’s own spiritual experience. This belief in the necessity and possibility of bringing cultural and public life into accordance with one’s own understanding of good and evil is fundamental for the “believing” member of the *intelligentsia*, a type which is very widespread in Russia. And he can believe in anything: in the triumph of good and justice, in the means of revolutionary terror justifying its ends, in the “God-bearing people”, in the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth or in various social utopias. It is no accident that Vasily Rozanov considered the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy to be “an enormous religious phenomenon, maybe the greatest phenomenon of Russian religious history”.<sup>2</sup> Once again, everything is out of place in this statement, but it reflects the reality of the Russian cultural context rather well. In a country where even atheism was religious — by the heat of its passion and energetic activism — religion knew no bounds and pervaded everything, from the traditional Orthodox Christianity of the simple folk to the raging agnosticism and atheism of part of the educated classes, which replaced organised religion for them.

The last half of the 19th century was a time of glaring political contradictions and the ascendancy of positivist ideas in Russia. The revolt of 14 students at the Academy of Fine Arts against outdated educational methods spilt over into other areas, forcing a reexamination of not only ethical and aesthetic, but social and ideological postulates as well. The art world split in two. Innovators considered mythological and

<sup>1</sup> I. Repin. *Izbrannye pis'ma*: V 2 t. 1867–1930. Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1969. V. 2, p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> V. V. Rozanov. *V temnykh religioznykh luchakh*. Moscow, Respublika, 1995, p. 36.

*Wanderers = Realists*



Nikolai Ghe. The Last Supper. 1869  
Russ. Mus.

Nikolai Ghe. What Is Truth? Christ and  
Pilate. 1890. Tret. Gal.

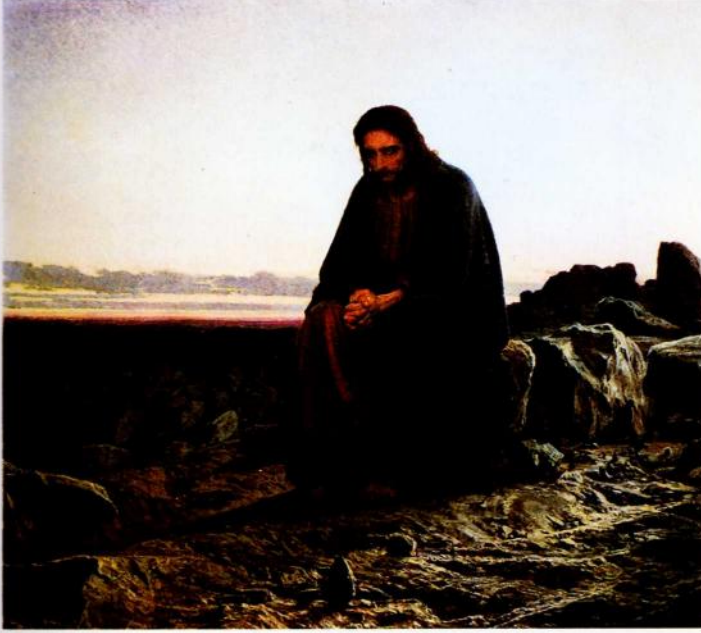
Biblical subjects too remote from the life of contemporary society, in need of replacement by depictions of “the harsh conflicts of reality”. A critical, socially oriented attitude focusing on the lives of the “humble and oppressed” strata of society and odes to Russian nature — these were the main ideas of the artists who came to be known as the “Wanderers” for their active exhibition activities in many Russian cities.

The Wanderers were not some nationalist group obsessed only with things Russian. They travelled abroad much and greatly esteemed the art of various countries. However, their understanding of the artist’s role in society differed significantly from the European one. “Though we are always seeing new and fresh things here,” writes Ilya Repin from France in February 1874, “most of it is formal. The French are entirely uninterested in the human being: costumes, colours, lighting — that is what attracts them in nature. However, as far as taste, tact, lightness and grace go, they are accomplished masters...”<sup>3</sup>

For himself and for the Russian art which he saw himself as embodying, Repin sees a different path, which he describes in another letter to the same recipient: “You say we need to move towards light and colour. No! Here, too, our goal is content. The character and soul of the person, the drama of life, impressions of nature, her life and meaning, and the spirit of history — this is what concerns us, it seems to me. For us, paint is a weapon: it exists to express our thoughts...”<sup>4</sup> The Russian artist distances himself from the purely aesthetic matters in which the French are immersed. He sees art’s purpose in spiritual revelation.

The Wanderers did indeed create marvellous genre paintings, portraits and landscapes whose motifs were drawn from contemporary life. To their credit are many works, which revive the “spirit of history”. However, these Realists of the last half of the 19th century, with their fierce opposition to “lifeless” Biblical subjects, not only turned to them often in their works, but expressed more vividly in these works than anywhere else the dramatic problems of contemporary life. In this contradiction lies one of the features peculiar to

<sup>3</sup> Repin. Op. cit. V. 1, p. 113.  
<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 123.



Ivan Kramskoi. Christ in the Desert. 1872. Tret. Gal.

Russian culture, which recurs in various ways throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. "The creations of the Russian spirit always bifurcate, just like Russian historical reality... In other countries one can observe all manner of contradictions, but only in Russia does thesis turn into antithesis."<sup>5</sup> These words, belonging to the well-known philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, accurately reflect the situation in the 19th- and early 20th-century Russian art world.

In 1863, Nikolai Ghe showed *The Last Supper* (Russian Museum) to the public for the first time. Never before had a painting provoked such passionate debate. Good and evil, loyalty and betrayal — these eternal moral contradictions lie at the base of the artist's conception. Events of the day, a schism between former confederates at the journal *Sovremennik*, served as the emotional impulse for the choice of this subject, a widespread one in Western art.

Ghe chose neither a group portrait nor a genre picture to represent the conflict of ethical opponents, but a Biblical subject instead. This helped the artist to avoid a concrete and private context and rise to a higher level, to the theme of loyalty and betrayal in general.

At a time of positivism's reign and the triumph of the "fact", artists and the Russian *intelligentsia* found themselves strangely drawn to religious questions. Once more, Leo Tolstoy comes to mind, this time with his attempt to reinterpret the Gospels, his thoughts on the subject of religion, the tortured writing of his *Confession* and, finally, his excommunication by the Church and the *intelligentsia's* violent reaction to it.

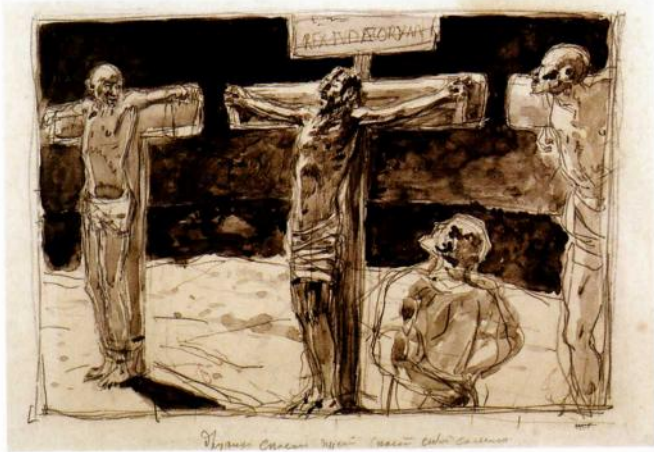
Like Tolstoy, many artists of the Realist school turned at that time to the figure of Jesus Christ. In their relation to Christ, they expressed their understanding of faith, the role of the individual in history and the mutual relationship of the individual and society.

Ivan Kramskoi, one of the most atheistically minded artists of the mid- to late 19th-century period, wrote while working on his painting *Christ in the Desert* (1872, Tretyakov Gallery): "... for five years now, he [Christ] has been standing before me, and I needed to paint him, to get it over with... During my work on him I thought, prayed and suffered much (I am going to use high-flown language)".<sup>6</sup>

Kramskoi, like many of his contemporaries, has an ambiguous relationship to Christ and religion. On the one hand, Christ is a moral authority for him. However, Kramskoi sees Christ as a figure more legendary than real. Grounded in this conviction, the artist at-

<sup>5</sup> N. A. Berdyaev. *Dusha Rossii // Russkaya ideya*. Moscow, 1992, p. 305.

<sup>6</sup> Ivan Nikolayevich Kramskoi. *Pis'ma, stat'i: V 2 t.* Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1965, p. 132.



Nikolai Ghe. The Crucifixion. Sketch variant for *The Crucifixion*. 1894. Russ. Mus.

tempts to “purge” the image of Christ of his divine hypostasis. Moreover, by desacralising Christ, he attempts to locate in him the seeds of atheism — and finds them! At a certain point, Christ stops being God for Kramskoi. “My God, or Christ, is the supreme atheist,” writes Kramskoi, “a man who destroyed God in the universe and placed him in the very centre of the human spirit, and goes to his death calmly for that reason.”<sup>7</sup> “What is a real atheist?” asks Kramskoi rhetorically, and answers the question: “He is a person who draws strength only from himself.”<sup>8</sup>

For Kramskoi, Christ, contemplating in the desert his role in the life of his people, whom he is leading to a new religion, is a metaphor for the conflict of opposing principles within man: strength and weakness, faith and disbelief.

Man’s suffering on account of ideas, truth and justice, and the opposition of the individual and the mob: these were critical issues in the last half of the 19th century. They were examined in Nikolai Ghe’s *What Is Truth?* (1890, Tretyakov Gallery) and *The Crucifixion* (1892, Musée d’Orsay; 1894, location unknown). If not directly connected with the life of Leo Tolstoy, these canvases were undoubtedly inspired by the conversations the artist had with the great thinker. *What Is Truth?* and *The Crucifixion* express the artist’s deep concern for the world’s moral imperfections and human suffering, as well as the conflicts between good and evil, truth and falsehood, and the individual and the state. Once again, Realist artist Ghe, like his contemporaries Repin, Kramskoi, Polenov and others, poses and solves problems of a non-religious nature through the use of a religious subject. Along with this, the fierce passions present in these canvases, and the profound suffering of their New Testament personages, which were inspired by actual contemporary issues, transforms these works into reflections of fiery emotions taken to a level of religious zeal. Naturally, neither Church nor state had any use for such pictures. The Church, because they were secular in principle. The state, because they harboured the seeds of criticism and protest against actual social ills.

So it’s not surprising that *What Is Truth?* was removed from the XVIII Wanderers Exhibition and forbidden from being shown in other cities. It was even removed from the exhibition catalogue.<sup>9</sup> *The Crucifixion*, painted in 1892, met with more or less the same fate.

“You cannot go anywhere today where you would not find crucifixions,” wrote Ghe at the end of 1892, “...neither America, nor France, nor England, nor Germany, nor here in Russia...”<sup>10</sup> It was this condi-

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 226.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 230.

<sup>9</sup> Nikolai Nikolayevich Ghe. *Pis'ma. Stat'i, Kritika. Vospominaniya sovremennikov*. Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1978, p. 144.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 165.



Ilya Repin. Christ Taken Prisoner. 1886. Russ. Mus.

Ilya Repin. Begone, Satan! 1895 (?) Russ. Mus.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 190.

<sup>12</sup> Repin. Op. cit. V. 2, p. 115.

<sup>13</sup> I. E. Repin. *Dalekoye blizkoye*. Leningrad, Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1982, p. 401.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 400.

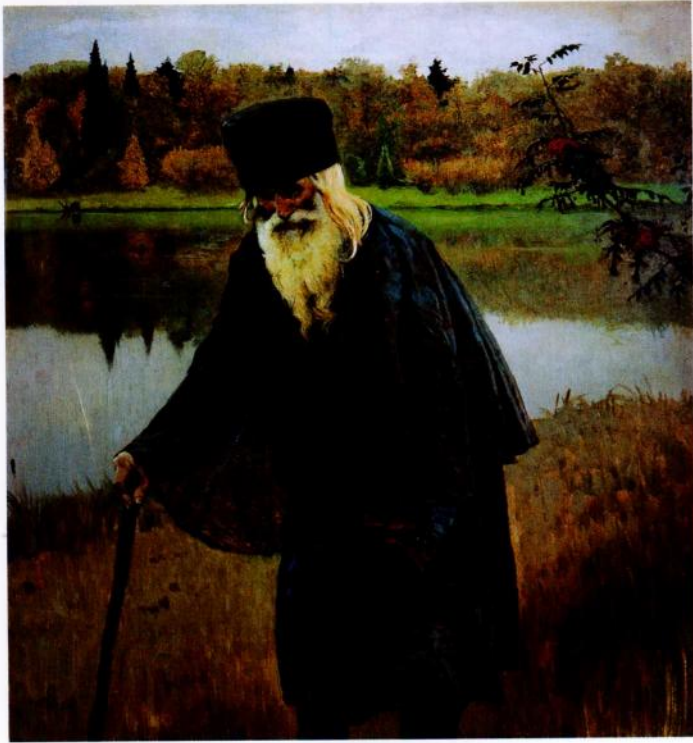
tion of society in which lack of understanding reigned, and where those sincerely distressed by human suffering were persecuted and condemned for telling the truth, which found its reflection in *The Crucifixion*. While examining the picture, Tsar Nicholas II remarked: "Why, that is just butchery!"<sup>11</sup> That was enough to have the picture forbidden by the censors. As a result, Ghe showed it in Paris, where it remained.

Around artworks effectively forbidden at the end of the 19th century by the Church and the government, as was wont to happen in Russia, heated debates arose exposing rifts in society's attitudes not only to art, but to the Church, religion, ethics, aesthetics and other questions of public life and existence in general.

Many Realist artists devoted themselves to expressing their world-view through religious subjects. One of them was Ilya Repin, the author of *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1870–1873). This creator of genre and historical compositions, as well as remarkable portraits of his contemporaries, always sought "something higher than mere mastery and virtuosity" in art. In a letter to his pupil Mariana Verevkina in 1894, Repin sees art's purpose in the "expression of the spirit" which reigns everywhere, to which he adds: "It can be comprehended only by the inspired and depicted only by the chosen..."<sup>12</sup>

Already a celebrated artist by that time, Repin sought new content more fitting of contemporary life. Several times he turns to the figure of Christ. His *Christ Taken Prisoner* (1886, Russian Museum) and *Begone, Satan!* (1895 [?], Russian Museum) are executed as superb sketches which were never realised as paintings. Finally, he creates one of his masterpieces, *Leo Tolstoy Barefoot* (1901, Russian Museum), depicting a perfectly concrete and well-known personage. The artist painted Tolstoy from life, "full size", barefoot, during prayers<sup>13</sup> — the way he saw him at Yasnaya Polyana, where he was a frequent guest, visiting with and observing the writer. Not really a portrait in the traditional sense, *Leo Tolstoy Barefoot* depicts its subject as a wanderer or apostle. "How much life and passion there is in that wanderer,"<sup>14</sup> wrote Repin of Tolstoy, revealing just what inspired him to create this image.

Man's spiritual life, his yearnings and sufferings and his departure from this sinful world — these themes conveyed in Repin's portrayal of Tolstoy captured the imagination of a significant part of Russian society. A different side of the writer was revealed by Mikhail Nesterov, one Russia's subtlest Symbolist artists.



Mikhail Nesterov. Hermit. 1888. Russ. Mus.

Nesterov devotes many of his paintings to people of the Church, remote from worldly vanity, immersed in the mysterious and rich world of spiritual quest (*On the Eve of the Annunciation*, 1895; *Hermit*, 1888 — both Russian Museum). As a rule, the personages in Nesterov's canvases are not portrait-like, having no concrete prototypes. They are symbols of the existence of a way of life, which rejects vanity and worldliness.

*St Dmitry the Murdered Tsarevich* (1899, Russian Museum) does represent a real-life historical personage: the son of Ivan IV (the "Terrible") and his last wife, Maria Nagaya. After his father's death, the regent Boris Godunov exiled Dmitry, together with his mother, to Uglich Monastery, where he was murdered. According to folk legend, the souls of the departed remain on earth for nine days among their nearest and dearest. Using this religious belief, Nesterov paints a picture depicting a real historical figure, but in an unearthly, otherworldly state. Humility, a tranquil soul and all-forgiveness form the meaning of this complex canvas, which has a splendidly painted landscape background, as do the majority of Nesterov's pictures.

The works of Mikhail Vrubel, one of Nesterov's contemporaries, exhibit a completely different kind of religiosity, rebellious in character, in keeping with the spirit of the Symbolist age. The thinking being tormented by good and evil, pride and sorrow, condemnation and revolt, strength of will and resignation to fate (*Seated Demon*, 1890, Tretyakov Gallery; *Flying Demon*, 1899, Russian Museum): this is the main theme of the mature Vrubel. Later, exhausted and wracked by disease, the suffering artist would turn to the image of the Prophet (*Six-Winged Seraph*, 1904, Russian Museum; *The Prophet*, 1905, Pushkin Museum; *The Vision of the Prophet Ezekiel*, 1906, Russian Museum). In his later years, Vrubel embodied his obsession with the idea of repentance in another masterpiece on a religious theme, *Six-Winged Seraph*. The irreversibility of fate and the retribution which the Seraph is about to inflict, with his raised sword and blazing fire, are fully captured in this vehement image.

Unlike the late 19th-century artists who preceded them, the Symbolists addressed issues far removed from the social realm. The individual, with his private spiritual world and suffering, is what concerns them. They feel themselves co-creators with God. They visualise divine prophecy.

The religiosity of the next generation of Russian artists was of another type altogether. It would seem that the avant-garde, with its declaration of war on everything accustomed and traditional,

numbers → symbols

Natalia Goncharova. Evangelists  
Tetrptych. 1911. Russ. Mus.

Evangelist (in Blue)  
Evangelist (in Red)  
Evangelist (in Grey)  
Evangelist (in Green)



ought to have destroyed the old forms not only in art, but in philosophy and religion as well, replacing them with something entirely different. In fact, everything turned out to be much more complex. The beginning of the 20th century, when innovative, avant-garde tendencies had just arisen and were beginning to develop in Russia, was also a time of the rebirth of the spiritual foundations of Christianity, as paradoxical as that may seem.

Goncharova, Malevich, Kandinsky and Filonov repeatedly turned to religious subjects in their art, and not only to pay tribute to icon painting traditions or the symbolic or neo-primitivist style. For all of them, religion remained a reference point to which they returned at various stages of their creative lives.

Attention to religion is always heightened in Russian art during times of cataclysm.

The First World War gave birth to Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin's *Virgin of Tender Mercy* (1914, Russian Museum) and other works containing the image of the Virgin. Natalia Goncharova created a series of lithographs entitled "Mystical Images of War" (1914, Russian Museum) and Pavel Filonov painted his *The German War* (1914, Russian Museum), in which the downward-falling figures refer back to a Christian prototype, the icon *The Descent into Hell*.

As a rule, Russian avant-garde artists no longer imbued their works on religious subjects with social and collective pathos. Instead, their connection with Scripture was inspired by the painterly and visual language of icon painting, woodcuts and folk art (*lubok*), and a return to the archetypal roots of religiosity in general. There were true believers among Russian avant-garde artists, like Natalia Goncharova and Olga Rozanova. Others began life, like many Russians, observing religious rites but later rejected God out of a general nihilism towards tradition or due to their own pride, like Pavel Filonov. Often, a grotesque attitude



Natalia Goncharova. The Elder with Seven Stars (Apocalypse). 1910. Tret. Gal.

to religion at some point in their lives gave way to a genuine quest for Christian spiritual values, as with Kazimir Malevich.

In one way or another, Russian avant-garde artists were tied to religion through their sense of the world as a whole, and in their striving to uncover and convey the fundamental bases of existence. Conscious of themselves as innovators and creators of a new aesthetic world, they sometimes identified themselves with God, whether seriously or in jest (David Burliuk's *Portrait of Vasily Kamensky*, 1917, Russian Museum; Svyatoslav Voinov's self-portrait in *Head of an Apostle*, 1919, Russian Museum).

Artists of the Russian avant-garde were often drawn to religion through their interest in and love for folk history, legends, symbols and myth-making. In creating their new art they imitated no one, except possibly God Himself! For example, Kazimir Malevich wrote in a letter to Mikhail Matyushin in 1916: "Christ opened up heaven on the earth, created a limit to space... Space is greater than heaven, stronger and mightier, and our new book [the theory of Suprematism] is a study of space in emptiness."<sup>15</sup>

In 1916, Malevich uses a comparison with Christ to explain his new concept of space as cosmos. At the end of the 1910s, his thoughts about art in general lead him to write the tract "God Is Not Cast Down. Art. The Church. The Factory". The essay's title and phraseology are suffused with religious pathos. In it, the artist concentrates on the topic of mutual relations between religion and society after the revolution of 1917, when religion and the Church were already factually prohibited. The conclusions which Malevich arrives at reveal his egocentric, cosmic-scale brand of religiosity and help us understand the artist's work both before 1917 and later, up to his death in 1935.

Invoking the Bible, Malevich interprets God's creation of the world thus: "God decided to create the world in order to free himself of it forever, to become free, to retreat into complete nothingness and eternal rest as a thinking being, for perfection lies in the complete cessation of thought. He desired to do the same for man on earth also. Man could not endure the system, however, violated it [original sin], escaped from bondage, and the whole system collapsed, its weight falling on him. In other words, God, feeling weight in himself, dispersed it into the system and weight became light, making him weightless and leaving man in a weightless system."<sup>16</sup> This "weightless system", in the words of Malevich, is the World, the Universe in which man lives. Suprematism is an artistic expression

<sup>15</sup> E. F. Kovtun. *Pis'ma K. S. Malevicha M. V. Matyushinu // Ezhegodnik rukopisnogo otdela Pushkinskogo doma na 1974*. Leningrad, 1976, pp. 177–195.

<sup>16</sup> Kazimir Malevich. *Sobr. soch.: V 5 t.* Moscow, Gileya, 1995, V. 1, p. 246.



Kazimir Malevich. *Head of a Peasant*. 1928–1929. Russ. Mus.

Kazimir Malevich. *Peasants*. Circa 1930. Russ. Mus.



of man's existence in the Universe. Weight, expressed by colour and form, is distributed throughout the weightless Universe (across the canvas, painted in one colour), forming a composition of Suprematist nature.

The Suprematist compositions *Black Square* (an icon of the new time, as the artist himself called it), *Black Cross* and *Black Circle* all have white backgrounds. These images are all semantically connected with Christian symbolism, as researchers have long noted. However, Malevich's repeated return to the same forms (*Black Square*) at various times in his life remains an enigma. What was it? Elementary replication of his masterpiece? Or did the act of repetition itself contain some special idea for the artist?

From Malevich's own writings it follows that by 1920 he sees his *Black Square*, first appearing in 1913 on the curtain of the opera *Victory over the Sun*, in a completely different light. "It is the shape of some kind of new live organism... It is not a painting but something else entirely", writes the artist, and goes on to explain his thoughts: "It occurred to me that if humanity drew the image of the Godhead in its own likeness, then maybe the *Black Square* is an image of God as a perfect being on the new path of today's beginnings."<sup>17</sup>

From this statement we can assume that Malevich's reason for repeating *Black Square* several times was that at different stages of his creative life that shape and colour ideally expressed his understanding of the image of God in his relationship to the universe and mankind. In effect, Malevich created a new type of icon. Unlike those who painted icons for the Orthodox Church based on Scriptural texts, howev-

<sup>17</sup> Pis'mo K. S. Malevicha M. O. Gershenzonu ot 20 marta 1920 // Cherny kvadrat / Sost. A. Shatskikh. Petersburg, Azbuka, 2001, pp. 438–439.

er, Malevich banishes all subjects from his art. He minimises his images, reducing them to pure forms and formulae.

The square, circle and cross used by ancient Russian icon painters to ornament the clothing of saints are monumentalised by Malevich, made into self-sufficient, polysemantic symbols denoting something more than just the escape of contemporary art from traditional representation into “nothingness”. The icon, a traditional Russian religious art form, returns through Malevich’s œuvre in a different, modernised form. Judging from the tract “God Is Not Cast Down”, Malevich sought a universal artistic language in order to embody a new religion. In his black, red and white squares, Malevich considered himself to be re-creating the universe in new forms of art. These new art forms, he thought, would enable the creation of a new “architecture” or structure of relationships of Man and the World, which meant a new religion.

Malevich’s public position and his ambitious project for the creation of a new religion did not pass unnoticed. Reviewing his book “God Is Not Cast Down”, one of the ideologues of Constructivism wrote: “I have shown repeatedly that Suprematism is the most rabid sort of reaction under the flag of revolution, in other words, doubly harmful reaction. Left-wing art, represented by its authentically revolutionary movement (Constructivism), must mercilessly sever the ties binding it to Suprematism. After Malevich’s open attack, even the doubters and the nearsighted will now be able to see the black face of the old art lurking under the mask of the red square.”<sup>18</sup>

The critic was right. For Malevich in the 1920s, Suprematism became an instrument for the creation of an artistic environment for a New Ideology, which he called a Religion; atheistically minded Constructivists associated this with the old traditions, including religious ones. “For many years,” wrote Malevich at the end of the 1910s, “I was busy with my painting movement and left the religion of the spirit by the wayside; twenty-five years passed, and now I have returned to or re-entered the World of Religion. I do not know why this has happened. I visit churches, look at the saints and the whole active spiritual world, and I see in myself, and maybe in the world as a whole, that the moment for a change of religion has arrived.”<sup>19</sup>

Reflecting on religion, the artist comes to the conclusion that the Church and the Factory, which he understands to be the structure of socialist society with its cultural centres and clubs, are very similar. “The walls of both are decorated with faces or portraits, organised similarly by worthiness or rank; both have their martyrs and heroes, whose names are entered into books of saints. There’s no difference at all, therefore; everything’s the same from all points of view, for the question is the same, the goal is the same, and the meaning lies in the search for God.”<sup>20</sup>

Malevich wrote this in 1920, after which he practically stopped painting, resuming again only at the decade’s end.

The personages created by him in the late 1920s and early 1930s are solemn and magnificent, intentionally impersonal, made for inclusion in some sort of iconostasis of new heroes and martyrs, like the saints on icons.

His *Head of a Peasant* (1928–1932, Russian Museum), with its crosses in the background, is unquestionably an embodiment of the accustomed and well-known image of Christ, but in the guise of a peasant.

Thus the theme of the new religion and the new people, led by God into a new life, appears in the peasant series of works, in which Suprematism, discovered in the mid-1910s, is transformed into a different hypostasis, as Malevich saw it.

<sup>18</sup> B. Arvatov. *Malevich. Bog ne skinut* (Iskusstvo. Tserkov'. Fabrika). Izdatel'stvo „Unovis“. Vitebsk 1922 // *Pechat' i revolyutsiya*. Moscow, 1922, No. 7, pp. 343–344.

<sup>19</sup> Pis'mo K. S. Malevicha M. O. Gershenzonu ot 11 aprelya 1920 // *Cherny kvadrat* / Sost. A. Shatskih. p. 441.

<sup>20</sup> *Kazimir Malevich. Sobr. soch.* V. 1, p. 248.

The quest of one of the 20th century's most innovative creators for new themes and a new artistic language had its source in the realm of his religious notions. In this sense, Malevich is a brilliant successor of the Russian artistic tradition.

The creative maximalism of Malevich and many other 19th- and 20th-century artists was connected to a large degree with their religious consciousness, which, though taking various forms, always permeated their world-view.