

Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia

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Some books enlighten and disappoint at the same time. This is how I felt having read Oleg Tarasov's book. Originally Tarasov's *doktorskaia dissertatsiia* (the second PhD), the book was first published in Russian and has now been painstakingly translated by Robin Milner-Gulland and lavishly published by Reaktion Books. The book deals with the changing place and meaning of the Russian icon in the Imperial period (from the late seventeenth to the early twentieth century). But in a broader sense the book is about complex exchanges between cultures and the construction of cultural myths.

Icons occupied a seminal place in Russian Orthodox worship and lifestyle; their presence sacralised every aspect of everyday life. The book provides eclectic evidence to illustrate this point: the household and behaviour manual, *Domostroi*, foreigners' accounts and the data on the production and sale of icons in the nineteenth century. It sketches subjects as broad as icon worship and charity, popular iconographic subjects, the miraculous power of icons and the attempts of the church to regulate popular veneration. The description of popular belief in the intercessory power of the saint represented on the icon is compelling, if not self-evident.

Some interpretations strike the reader as predictable, such as the discovery of the idea of 'a relic of pagan mindset' associated with the cult of icons (p. 104). Others strike as interesting but unverified. Following Fedotov, the author suggests, for example, that the cult of Mary (Mother of God in the Orthodox tradition) was identified, on the one hand, with the cult of Sophia the Wisdom of God and, on the other, with the cult of Nature and 'mother damp earth' (p. 105). In support of this argument he brings evidence from the peasant agricultural calendar, according to which the feasts of the Virgin coincided with the important cycles of agricultural life. We also learn that Russian popular religiosity had a 'Sophia orientation'. The identification

of Sophia with the Virgin implied a 'belief in the potential sanctity of matter, the base of all creation' and signified an uninterrupted connection between 'the earthly and incorporeal worlds' (p. 95). Given the number of miraculous appearances of Mother of God in the Russian lands through icons, many believed that Russia was the 'House of the Mother of God' (p. 107).

We also learn that in order to understand the function of icons in popular culture one has to appreciate the specialised curative qualities of icons devoted to particular saints. For example, one had to pray to St Antipas to be cured from a toothache, to St Martha for fever, to St John the Baptist (the one who was beheaded!) for a headache, to St Boniface in the case of drunkenness and to St Martinian if one was burning with sexual lust. If such prayers failed to deliver the requested cure, icons could be punished by being hung upside down, which Tarasov readily interprets as a sign of Bakhtinian carnival tradition. While the book provides good visual examples of such 'specialised' intercession icons, it does not specify whether the presence of the icon of particular saint was essential in bringing a desired result. Could a collection of prayers to popular saints be sufficient instead of icons?

While the first chapter lays out a background for the understanding of the place of icons in popular culture, Chapter 2 focuses on the religious schism of the seventeenth century, which became a watershed in Russian religious history. Following the semiotic approach of Jurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii, Tarasov interprets the schism as a complex interaction of two systems of signs, in which the traditional understanding of sacred symbols was confronted with attempts at reforming them. It was not purely a Russian religious phenomenon: Tarasov points out that at around the same time the Tridentine Catholicism was generating an interest and agitation around the sacred monogram (p. 123). However, despite the vigorous resistance to reforming attempts, the defenders of the old ritual followed the reformed Orthodox church in adopting a new form of visual theology, the didactic approach characteristic of the Baroque epoch. He discerns a more rational approach to the sacred image in both Old Believer depictions of the reformed ritual and in the icons of new saints (p. 125).

The beard was one of the 'holy' signs that Old Believers passionately defended alongside the sign of the cross, the language of the service and a number of other aspects of the ritual. While shaving beards became a sign of civilised westernised behaviour in the Russia of Peter I, in popular eyes beards were linked with the likeness of God's image in humanity. The emphasis on beards can be traced in the Old Believer iconography of Maksim the Greek and portraits of Old Believer merchants. Tarasov does not see any gender implications here. It is important, however, to note that wearing a beard was not only a reflection of Christ's image, but a one of the most powerful symbols of male identity in the Old Believer community, marking both gender and age difference, and symbolising the transition from adolescence to adulthood.⁽¹⁾

Chapter 3 – 'In a world without grace' – continues the theme of the schism's impact on the aesthetic and theological systems of Russian Orthodoxy. Tarasov explores the transformation of the collective unconscious during the transition from early modern to Imperial Russia. Following Solov'ev, he interprets Old Believers as an embodiment of religious individualism. He observes the ways this individualisation of faith led to the subjection of the icon to a more diverse, 'broader, and more intense cultural milieu which widened its significance yet further.' (p. 144)

Tarasov surveys the eschatological beliefs of Old Believers, pointing out their objection to the royal iconographers' depiction of the royal persons on icons painted in the style of S. Ushakov. The resistance to the cult of the Emperor was strongest among the most radical millenarian sects like Fedoseevtsy. The rejection of the sacred nature of royalty was linked with the tsar's disloyalty to the old ritual. Comparing the Schism with the Reformation in western Europe, he argues that in Russia 'disenchantment' with the world was caused not by the emphasis on personal relationship with God or belief in predestination, but 'by the loss of the Church and tsardom of special charisma' (p. 159). He offers examples of the followers of *netovtsy* and *riabinovtsy* as an illustration of the extreme individualisation of belief. They believed that due to the total infection of the world by the Antichrist, believers could only pray in a room painted black, having for decoration only a simple cross without any representation of Christ on it. Tarasov makes a valuable point that at the turn of the seventeenth century the icons combining both 'minor' and 'major' eschatology came to

be placed in 'fine corners' of peasant houses, thus becoming a centre of everyday life (p. 149). Unfortunately this point, as with many others, is not supported with evidence.

In this chapter we observe the representation – typical for the whole book – of Russian culture in a dualistic framework:

The Schism strongly polarised the collective consciousness. Proponents of reform tended to affirm love of life and the fundamental worth of worldly existence. Its opponents, though, drew conclusions that were in large part hostile to everything earthly and transitory and remained spiritually deaf to the demands of the new culture and secular system of sensibilities that were evolving. (p. 147)

Here Tarasov uncritically accepts the self-presentation of Old Believers and takes at face value their polemical representation of their opponents. Surely, among the followers of the Old Ritualists there were as many 'life-affirming' characters as among their opponents, while the pessimists were present equally on both sides.

A dualistic model is applied in the discussion of eschatology. Tarasov points out that the ambivalence of a religious consciousness was reawakened by eschatological fear: the Old Believers refused to venerate icons that depicted unclean spirits (the Devil) and unholy persons or animals (soldiers at the Crucifixion site, the ass from the entrance to Jerusalem). He writes of the cleansing of icons prior to self-immolations and about the sacralisation of the icon painter. These examples emphasise binary oppositions in the religious mind: good versus evil, holy versus unclean, life versus death (pp. 162-3).

Part II consists of three chapters that draw a fascinating picture of the changing language of icon painting in the modern period (the eighteenth – early twentieth centuries). It provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the iconography of the period, defining it as a popular craft that creatively adopted the European Mannerist style. It deals with three groups of icons of the period: first, the 'Frankish' or painted icons; second, the post-schism Old Believer iconography; and third, the cheap mass-produced icons from Suzdal'. The main aim of this part is to show the point of contact between two tendencies of the modern period, one towards a greater individualisation of religious experience and the other towards unity of culture, 'an urge to understand the self as part of a whole' (p. 201).

Based on foreign models, notably following the Mannerist style, the Russian painted icons of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries unwittingly adopted a post-Tridentine didacticism. Tarasov shows that Russian iconographers were not alien to the Catholic model of *Arte Sacra* that 'washed away' the confessional boundaries of cultures. In the Muscovite period the Russian painters reworked western models within the framework of the Byzantine canon. In Imperial Russia, however, western models were openly quoted and imitated. Tarasov expertly provides examples of such borrowings: the use of the dark background, a tendency towards sensory illusion, the use of the unorthodox shape of board (oval, octagonal as opposed to rectangular), and so on. And whilst the craftsmen tried to adapt these western models to their customers' tastes, the meaning of the icon inadvertently changed. It no longer tried to ally symbol with meaning but rather provided a commentary on symbols. Metaphor has replaced metaphysics and the Western-style rhetoric has replaced mystery.

The depiction of subject matter also suffered a dramatic change. While in the medieval art the subject's face (*lik*: usually painted last) was a representation of general characteristics associated with a particular saint, the new icon painters tried to capture individual portrait features. Imitating the new canons developed by the Renaissance artists, the icon painters strived for a greater individualisation in the depiction of their characters. The changes reflected the shift in the understanding of a person: the ontological, strictly patristic understanding was replaced by a psychological one. At the same time, the shift in the representation of the royal person reflected a change in Russian statehood. While symbolic features of the saints became more

personalised, royal portraits became more iconic, encouraging both the sacralisation and glorification of the royal person.

Similarly, significant transformations were taking place in the representation of the landscape. While in the medieval icons landscape – depicted in a ‘reverse perspective’ – was symbolic and peripheral, suggesting that natural world had no value, in the new icons landscape received a new meaning.⁽²⁾ It was structured according to a true perspective and became a kind of ‘natural’ medium for the activity of holy and real-life personages. More precision and skills were needed in depicting particular locations and architectural structures. Attention to detail was a specific feature of the eighteenth-century drive towards rationalism and science, ‘documentalism’ and ‘mechanistic understanding of matter’ (p. 241). Icon painters followed the fashions of the time: the allegorical landscape of the Baroque age was replaced by the idealistic or Romantic landscape of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Landscape reminiscent of Salvator Rosa would appear on the icons depicting saints in wilderness. There was also a tendency to include realistic events into an icon, ‘thus localising the symbolism of the scene in a concrete historical space’ (p. 241). In the early twentieth century the depiction of landscape in icons had nationalistic uses: the walls of the Kremlin served as an idealised spiritual centre of Holy Russia.

The icon painters also made use of other devices of Baroque culture, such as the incorporation of words and texts into the image, which served to strengthen the didactic aspect of the prayer image and, more generally, to elevate the role of reason in religious experience (pp.255-6). New icons became saturated with heraldic signs, cartouches and emblems that integrated a motto, picture and an epigram. Everyday objects, such as curtains, mirrors and books, found their way into the new icons, altering the icon’s cultural meaning. Tarasov provides a compelling interpretation of the aesthetic and religious significance of these new elements, showing their didactic impulse.

Chapter 5 looks into the world of the post-seventeenth-century Old Believer icon and tells a remarkable story of modern myth-making. While the changes in Old Believer icons were not as obvious as in the icons of the New Ritual, Tarasov makes it clear that a subtle transformation nevertheless took place. Despite the dissenters’ reverence of the entire pre-Nikonian tradition, they have shown a predilection for the Muscovite mid-sixteenth-century tradition that favoured complicated, multi-figured compositions, characterised by painterly scholasticism. Tarasov, however, observes the signs of change, even in these seemingly traditional icons, expressed in the tendency to illustrate the holy subjects, to surround the icon of a saint by the scenes from the saint’s life often accompanied by a list of headings, which were ‘echoes of more general mind-set of the age’ (p. 315). Tarasov uses the term ‘hidden montage’ to characterise the complicated polyphony of layers and quotations in the icons made for Old Believer patrons. The elements of true perspective, Baroque ornamentation and far from symbolic landscape can be found in Old Believer icons, too.

Adoration of pre-Nikonian icons by bearded schismatics also gave rise to a fascinating phenomenon of counterfeit and stylised icons. Beginning in the Romantic era of Nicholas I’s reign, stylisations became increasingly popular by the turn of the century. Mass production of icons painted in the ‘old manner’ was part of the Old Believer myth. Tarasov suggests that definitions of old styles used by icon-painters and later by specialists, such as the Stroganov, Moscow and Novgorod schools, were nothing other than nineteenth-century inventions. The same can be said about the style of icon painting attributed to Andrey Rublev, the medieval monk and icon painter, whose life is saturated with myths and legends.⁽³⁾ Old Believers, who regarded Rublev’s icons as wonder-working, had contributed to the growing popularity and mythologisation of the icon-painter’s name. The Old Believers should thus be seen not as the guardians of the old iconographic tradition of medieval Russia, but as creators of the myth of Holy Russia which was a strikingly modern phenomenon.

The last chapter serves as a conclusion and deals with two different phenomena: the folklorisation of the mass-produced icon and the adoption of popular icon by the Russian avant-garde of the early twentieth century. Quoting Kazimir Malevich, whose ‘Black Square’ (1913) is described as the icon of the time, Tarasov shows that, during the era of social experiment, while the leftist artists were busy inverting the aesthetical elements of the Russian icon for the sake of new forms of art, the subterranean levels of

collective unconscious were awakened. The destruction of the old cultural world in the forge of the revolution was not complete: the old symbols were filled with new meaning. Whether it was Palekh's attempt to revolutionise the Holy Family by giving carpenter's tools to St Joseph and a hammer to the Child Jesus, or a propaganda plate that transformed the apocalyptic image of St Michael into a Red Army horseman, the new icons mythologised reality and built bridges between traditional culture and the new society.

Tarasov has written a very important book which is bold and thought-provoking, but problematic in its methodology. The book is the first serious attempt to engage with the iconography of Imperial Russia (most iconological studies deal with the traditional medieval or early modern icons). It is an invaluable encyclopaedia of the visual culture of modern Russian Orthodoxy. The author must be given credit for the skilful selection of visual material, which organises the book's narrative and provides compelling evidence for many of its arguments. The illustrations, which were obtained from state museums and private collections, are truly stunning.

The book defines itself as a cultural study of the icon in the Imperial period. Whilst its methodological approach is heavily influenced by the semiotic approach of Jurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii, its evidence and narrative, in fact, suggest a more complex picture than the one presented by semiotics models. While the symbolism and the visual language of the icon are explored well, some of the book's ambitious aims require a different approach. In order to understand the degree of transformation in the icon's meaning and functioning within society, more attention needed to be paid to the social context of icon painting and distribution. We learn little about the process of commissioning, social conditions of icon painting workshops, the icon markets. For example, it seems essential to understand who was behind the counterfeit icons (we only learn that they were some unidentified Old Believer patrons).

Despite its promise to capture the collective mind-set and the *mentalité* of the believer, the book remains very much within the domain of traditional art history, focusing on the interpretation of the visual image and its intended message. It is questionable whether we can discern the mind-set of the believer from the play of symbols in the iconic space. Tarasov's approach can be contrasted with that of Vera Shevtzov, who provides a much more convincing account of believers' experiences of, and relationship with, such sacred images.⁽⁴⁾ Using narrative and archival sources she explores the story behind the icon and social interaction with the icon. In Tarasov's work, it seems that numerous archival and ethnographic resources that could provide answers to all these questions were bypassed. Discussing Old Believers, for example, either prescriptive evidence, polemics or the testimonies of outsiders were used. This evidence obviously does not give us any idea about the practices of religious dissenters.

The book promises to be a revision of Russian cultural history since the sixteenth century. In most parts it remains, however, a traditional interpretation of culture from the artist's and art historian's point of view.

Notes

1. On gender aspects of Old Believer history and culture see I. Paert, *Old Believers, Religious Dissent and Gender in Russia, 1760-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. On the role and meaning of landscape in early modern icons and maps see V. A. Kivelson, 'The Souls of the Righteous in a Bright Place': landscape and orthodoxy in seventeenth-century Russian maps', *The Russian Review*, 58 (January 1999), 1-25.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. On the myth of Andrey Rublev see L. Hughes, 'Inventing Andrei: Soviet and Post-Soviet views of Andrei Rublev and his Trinity icon', *Slavonica*, 9. 2, (2003), 83-90.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. V. Shevtzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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