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JOLYON MITCHELL

Portraying Religion and Peace in Russian Film

Peace and religion have taken on many cinematic guises in Russia over the last century. In the earliest days of Russian cinema, on the rare occasions when the Orthodox Church was represented on film, it was often depicted as a background force of social cohesion and a preserver of the peace. In the years following the October revolution of 1917, along with other religious traditions, the Orthodox Church was regularly depicted as the enemy of the people's peace and flourishing, which only the Bolsheviks could bring to Mother Russia. Peace was no longer to be found in the Church but through radical reform, industrialisation as well as the end of imperialist, capitalist and clerical rule. As we shall see, films were commonly used by the Bolsheviks to promote their vision of revolutionary peace. This vision evolved over seventy years of Soviet rule. Likewise, so have the depictions of Orthodox Christianity in Russian film, though, with a few notable exceptions, it was not until the collapse of the Soviet Empire that an increasing number of filmmakers have begun to portray aspects of Orthodoxy in far more sympathetic terms than their communist predecessors did. In a world where religion is now commonly depicted as a cause of violence, it is intriguing to notice how in Russia it has recently been cinematically portrayed as a resource for those searching for personal peace.

In this article I chart the complex and changing relations between film and religion in Russia since the earliest days of cinema. To do this I am going beyond the usual areas of study in the emerging field of religion and film, which have tended to concentrate upon the work of a few well-known Russian directors such as Andrei Tarkovsky. I am also using the theme of peace as a way to reflect on the relationship. As I have argued elsewhere (Mitchell 2007a: 224–6), depictions of actual peacemaking are

a comparative rarity within the world of film, and compared to screen violence, it is a topic rarely studied by film scholars. Likewise a general overview of religion and Russian film has rarely been discussed up to this point, and there are few publications explicitly analysing this theme.¹ Investigating how both religion and different kinds of peace are depicted through a wide range of Russian films also provides a useful window onto the changing fortunes over the last century of various religious traditions, especially Russian Orthodoxy. To understand the relationship between religion, film and often conflicting visions of peace in Russia it is helpful to take into account the changing political context in which the films have been produced. I will therefore describe the interactions between religion and film in Tsarist Russia, then in Soviet Russia and, more briefly, in post-Soviet Russia.

CONTROLLING THE PEACE IN TSARIST RUSSIA

The first film screening in Russia was shown in May 1896 at the Aquarium Theatre in St. Petersburg. It featured Lumière films such as *L'Arrivée du train en gare* and *Partie d'Écarté*. The first film actually made in Russia captured scenes connected with a civil religious ritual: the Coronation of Tsar Nicholas II on 26 May [O.S. 14 May] 1896. This short sequence contains shots of the Imperial couple entering and leaving the Cathedral of the Assumption in the Kremlin, as well as a line of extravagantly dressed foreign dignitaries. The religious rituals at the centre of the Coronation are not recorded nor are the numerous orthodox priests robed in gold or the golden icons that covered the walls of the cathedral. A camera did record, however, the moment a few days later when the Czar was presented to the Russian people, only for a stand to collapse, leading to a stampede where hundreds were crushed to death. The film was confiscated and has never been seen since that time.

Both the Czar and the leaders of the Orthodox Church had an ambivalent and often suspicious attitude towards the cinema. Initially, the cinematic depiction of Jesus was a complete taboo. The Orthodox Church responded almost immediately to one portrayal of Jesus with a letter issued by the office of the Holy Synod in 1898: 'On the inadmissibility of holy subjects being shown by means of the so-called 'Living photography'.' This was Russia's first film censorship document. Other early Jesus films provoked further controversy. *La Vie et La Passion du Christ* (Pathé, production began in 1902), the world's earliest colour Jesus movie, was initially censored by the Orthodox Church's Holy Synod

when it first arrived in Russia as a 'violation of the Gospels', though it was permitted more widespread circulation in 1907. There were some supporters of such ventures who saw similarities between on the one hand cinematic communication and on the other religious iconography and painting. When it was finally screened the police were present to ensure that everyone present took off their hats as a sign of reverence. It still provoked controversy. In 1913 the Czar famously wrote in the margin of a police report on cinema suggesting films could be divisive: 'I consider cinematography to be an empty, useless and even pernicious diversion. Only an abnormal person could put this fairground business on the same level as art. It is all nonsense and no importance should be attributed to it.' Nonetheless, he did make use of a court filmmaker, to record significant events. The precedent ensured other Russian filmmakers followed suit. Between 1907 and the Great War over 1,800 newsreels were produced. The early days of Russian filmmaking concentrated upon grand state occasions and sometimes explicitly religious events such as the 'solemn procession of Pilgrims at Kiev'.

Alongside this non-fiction news and documentary films there emerged a number of fiction films, where both religious themes and figures made appearances. This cinematic trespassing into the world of the sacred contributed to recurring attempts by the Orthodox Church to control content. Two examples suffice. First, the silent film entitled *Departure of a Grand Old Man* (1912, *Ukhod velikovo startza*). Directed and produced by Yakov Protazanov and Elizaveta Thiman, it portrays peasants requesting land from Leo Tolstoy, his refusal to help on the grounds that his wife owns the land, his subsequent arguments with his wife, his increased depression and his final encounter in the clouds with Christ. In Russia at that time the power of censorship lay with the Orthodox Church, who banned this film on the grounds that they found the depiction of Tolstoy, himself excommunicated in real life, being led into heaven as blasphemous. Others have suggested that the film was censored due to the negative depiction of Tolstoy's wife. Second, *Father Sergius* (1917, *Otets Sergiy*), which was co-directed by Yakov Protazanov and Alexandre Volkoff, and is a silent film based on a short story written in 1890 by Leo Tolstoy: *Father Sergius* (published 1898). The central figure discovers on the eve of his wedding that his fiancée has had an affair with Nicholas I. Deeply disillusioned he turns to the church, becoming an Orthodox monk, and then a hermit, beset by doubts and temptations. Over 112 minutes it brings together religion, politics, lust and heartbreak, culminating in the protagonist's demise. This tragic tale cinematically reflects the

tension between religious commitment and personal desire, and has been described as both scandalous and groundbreaking.

PROMOTING REVOLUTIONARY PEACE IN SOVIET RUSSIA

Following the revolutions of 1917 and the ensuing civil war, the new communist leaders were swift to encourage the use of film for propaganda purposes. Consider Leon Trotsky's article in *Pravda* on 'Vodka, the Church, and the Cinema' (12 July 1923). In it he berates his comrades for not making better use of film to persuade the masses. 'Here is an instrument which we must secure at all costs!' He portrays the cinema in competition 'not only with the tavern but also with the church'. He believes that 'this rivalry may become fatal for the church' if the cinema is put to effective use. For Trotsky the cinema provides 'spectacular images of greater grip than are provided by the richest church' or 'mosque or synagogue'. Trotsky asserts that 'the cinema amuses, educates, strikes the imagination by images, and liberates you from the need of crossing the church door'. For some, like Trotsky, cinema had the potential to replace the need for visiting traditional places for worship, for others it was perceived as a powerful tool of persuasion to be used to promote the new regime.

During the 1920s and 1930s filmmakers appropriated and inverted religious themes. Martyrs, not for the Church, but for the Soviet cause are commonly depicted and celebrated. For example, in Dovzhenko's *Earth* [*Zemlya*] (1930) a vigorous young man, Vasil, is murdered and then portrayed as a martyr for the new Soviet way of life. Dovzhenko's revised script (completed in 1956) promotes a fervent anti-religious message, with Vasil's father declaring to the priest: 'There is no God. . . Because if there had been a God, even if he weren't altogether almighty or all-merciful, even if he'd been a miserable little God, turned a bit senile by age and all that worship, even one like that wouldn't have let my son die that way.' Later at the collective farm board Vasil's Father 'begs' his listeners: 'If my Vasil has died for a new life. . . he should be buried in a new way. I don't want priests and deacons seeing him out for a fee, but our own boys and girls with new songs about the new life'. While an old priest calls down God to smite the people, they sing a new song in a 'godless' world. Through this film Dovzhenko belittles the old elites: landowners and church leaders. *Earth* stands in longer tradition of other early Soviet films, such as Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925) and *Battleship Potemkin* (1927) and Pudovkin's *Storm Over Asia* (1928), which celebrate the deaths of martyrs for the Soviet anti-religious cause.

There are many other explicit anti-religious cinematic statements to be found during the 1930s. *The Feast of St Jorgen* (1930, directed by Protazanov Prazdnik), sometimes described as 'an exposé' of religious faith, shows how two thieves escape from prison, hide in a Church, and while there they observe the riches accumulated by the Priests. The result is that they aim to relinquish the Church of its ill-gotten gains. In other films, such as the different animated versions of *The Tale of the Priest and of his Worker Balda* (1934, Michael Tsekhanovsky; 1940, Panteleimon Sazanov; 1956, Anatoly Karanovich; 1973, Inessa Kovlevskaya), based on an 1830 poem by Alexander Pushkin, priests were represented as lazy, dishonest or exploitative scoundrels. Nuns also became the focus of satire or parody. Alexander Medvedkin's 1934 irreverent comedy, *Happiness*, includes the sight of nuns wearing transparent tops and a priest fighting for money.

Filmmakers, like Dziga Vertov, perceived cinematic dramas or fairy-tales as the 'opiate of the people', with realist documentaries celebrated as a more true form of communication. Vertov was a vociferous proponent and practitioner of such a view, with the first reel of his 1931 film *Enthusiasm* including actual footage from 1929 of steeples being pulled down, icons or relics being removed and churches converted into workers' clubs. This complex film received much hostile criticism in Russia, not for its obvious atheistic tendencies, but rather for its failure to show the followers of religion involved in a fight against socialism. Religion, like subservience to the Czar and addiction to alcohol, is relegated to a historical shadow rather than a dynamic force countering the Soviet state.

Some filmmakers' personal experience of the Orthodox Church informed, perhaps even haunted, their filmmaking. The director Sergei Eisenstein would never forget the dramatic rituals he experienced in church as a boy, and would sometimes refer to his Jewish heritage. According to one biographer of Eisenstein, Marie Seton, he once confessed that 'he had spent sixteen years of his life striving to destroy the fascination that religion exerted over him'. His depictions of priests and other members of the Orthodox Church are far from flattering in *October* (1927/8), with the image of a worshipping priest juxtaposed with pictures of the supposedly corrupt leaders of the 1917 provisional government. *October*, produced to commemorate the Bolshevik revolution ten years before, begins with the destruction of the statue of Alexander III, holding the symbols of 'God' and 'country': an orb and a sceptre. Towards the end of the film the Tsar and Tsarina's private apartments in The Winter Palace are overrun by the Bolsheviks who 'find a host of sentimental

icons portraying the allegiance of religion and the state, including Christ blessing the imperial family'.² Through the use of an 'intellectual montage', which brings together a baroque image of Jesus, Hindu and Aztec Gods, the Buddha, and a primitive idols, Eisenstein appears to portray religions as the same. The juxtaposition of this with military paraphernalia reflects the perceived parallels between patriotism and delusional belief.

Eisenstein's unfinished *Bezhin Meadow* (1936/7), mostly destroyed by fire during a bombing raid in the Second World War, includes a shot of a church being transformed into a club for workers. The overturning of the old order is symbolically represented by an inverted reflection of a church in water. The icons are carried without ceremony and deference, the workers become part of the icons themselves and a life-size crucifix is removed under the arm of a bearded labourer. Through the 'sanctification of the peasant', here is the 'triumph of the people's vital energy over lifeless deities'.³ In his anti-German historical epic *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), the monk associated with the Teutonic crusading knights appears to look on approvingly as baby after baby is dropped into a fire. There is greater ambiguity towards religious figures and spaces in both *Ivan the Terrible Part 1* (1944) and *Part 2* (1946, released in 1958). The religious leaders both conspire against and stand up to Ivan's tyrannical rule, reminiscent of Stalin's paranoid leadership, while the cathedral becomes a place of failed assassination and murder.

Not all Soviet filmmakers were entirely negative towards established Orthodox religion. Some film historians argue that this ambivalence towards religion is to be seen even more clearly among other filmmakers during 'the Thaw' following the death of Stalin in 1953. For example, Tony Shaw suggests that even during the religious persecutions initiated by Nikita Khrushchev, films there were several more sympathetic, even positive portrayals of priests. This is a persuasive argument when considered in the light of such films as: *The Miracle Worker* (Vladimir Skuibin, 1960) where a Young Pioneer is 'designated a saint after finding a 'miracle-working' icon', *Clouds over Borsk* (Vasilii Ordyskii, 1960) which sympathetically depicts 'religious sects that believed in speaking in tongues', or the compassionate priest in *Everything Remains for the People* (Georgii Natanson, 1964). Grant concludes that such

'relatively sympathetic portrayals of clerics were a far cry from those seen on Soviet cinema screens in the 1920s and 1930s when priests were characterised as criminal deviants, or in the late 1940s and early 1950s when their role as agents of Western influence was accentuated.'

Ambivalence towards religion almost becomes celebration in the seven films directed by Andrei Tarkovsky. These films have received considerable attention from those concerned with the relation between film and religion. This is not surprising given the explicit religious themes and memories, as well as the common use of religious art and symbols in his films (for example *Mirror*, 1974). For instance, *Andrei Rublev* goes behind the apparently peaceful world of religious iconography to reveal a sixteenth-century Russia torn by conflict, an artist wracked by guilt and the inability to create. This black and white world is only transformed into colour in the last few minutes of this over three-hour film, where Tarkovsky slowly reveals to the viewer Rublov's most famous icon: the Trinity. Unlike the rapid montage movements of Eisenstein, Tarkovsky is not afraid to hold a shot on a face or a landscape or an interior and allow the viewer to savour what they are seeing. This can be seen in his last film *The Sacrifice* (1986), a Swedish production he made knowing he was dying of lung cancer, which famously depicts the self-sacrifice of Erland who offers his life to God in order to try to avert a nuclear war that would destroy everything. Like several of his earlier Russian films it is hard to avoid the recurring religious motifs, though this provokes diverse responses, with some critics claiming God is absent while others celebrate his presence through Tarkovsky's works. Tarkovsky's largely sympathetic treatment of religious themes provides a marked contrast to the early *agit* films, part of the anti-religious propaganda of the 1920s and 1930s. Tarkovsky's work is a comparative rarity, especially among the films produced during seven decades of communist rule, and his films anticipate many of the themes to be found in films produced following *glasnost* and the end of the Soviet regime.

SEARCHING FOR PEACE IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

From the mid 1980s, Russia underwent a number of dramatic transformations. With the accelerated economic restructuring of *perestroika* and the increased freedom of expression through *glasnost* the Russian people experienced radical political, social and economic changes. These transformations, which began under Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership, had a significant impact upon the depiction of religion in Russian film. *Repentance* (Tengiz Abuladze, 1986, 7) represents the first notable work from the *glasnost* era that is permeated with religious themes. Set in a small Russian village it tells the haunting story of a woman who is on trial for repeatedly exhuming the body of a former town leader. This is a powerful Georgian parable about digging up the past, in particular the

painful Stalinist past, and atoning for buried wrongs. While many of these films are highly critical of past evils, some are equally critical through their narratives of religious intolerance or anti-Semitic tendencies (for example *Luna Park*, directed by Pavel Lounguine, 1991).

More recently other films have depicted protagonists seeking to escape their violent pasts and searching for peace. There is often a religious resonance to this quest. In *The Hero* (Veledinski, 2006) Kir, a soldier returning from the Chechen wars, first encounters the ghosts of his two fallen comrades and then an Orthodox priest, Father Sergei. In real life the two actors who play Kir and Father Sergei are twins. In the film at one memorable moment they wrestle, like Jacob and the angel (*Genesis* 32), but the Priest appears to be trying to help Kir come to terms with his past. Later he helps him find the graves of his fallen comrades. Unlike the anti-clerical depictions of the 1920s and 30s the Orthodox priest is now regularly depicted in a more favourable light.⁴

One of Russia's most popular films of 2006 was *The Island* (Pavel Lungin), which is primarily set on an isolated island monastery in 1976 somewhere in Northern Russia, and depicts a small group of Orthodox monks in endearing detail. The central figure, Father Anatoly (played by Pavel Mamonov) is portrayed as uneasy figure, searching for personal forgiveness for being forced to shoot his captain during the Second World War. While this inner war rages on he attracts other people to his boiler room come sooty cell, in search of advice, healing or holiness. Before his death he is reconciled on several different levels and for all his idiosyncrasies he is depicted highly sympathetically. The film attracted considerable support from the Orthodox Church, with some advertising the film and others buying out entire cinemas. In ways reminiscent of how certain churches in North America made use of *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2003), so some Orthodox Christians made use of *The Island*. At one cinema viewers were even encouraged to take off their hats and pray before it began.

Rather than rejecting religious belief, some figures are now depicted as embracing religious faith. Two contrasting examples will suffice. First, in Vladimir Khotinenko's *The Moslem* (1995), a young man Kolya is captured while fighting in Afghanistan and converts to Islam. His return to his home village, after eight years in Afghanistan, is far from peaceful as, in the light of his newfound faith, he refuses to conform. In one memorable scene his brother, Fedka, attempts unsuccessfully to force his brother to re-embrace his native Orthodoxy by making him drink vodka and kiss an icon. Second, towards the end of *Cargo 200*, one of the most talked about

films of 2007, Artem Kazakov, one of the central characters and a professor of Scientific Atheism at Leningrad University, goes to church and asks to be baptised.

These different examples from the post-Soviet period reflect how film in Russia has become increasingly sympathetic towards religious themes, characters and controversies. While it is tempting to interpret this as a return to pre-revolutionary depictions, such a circular description does not do justice to the ways in which film has evolved in Russia over the last century. Religion remains a complex and powerful force that is emerging with greater confidence into the public sphere. The Russian films of the last two decades reflect this greater openness and are beginning to reveal some of the religious fault-lines within post-Soviet Russia.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have described the interactions between religion and film in Tsarist Russia, then in Soviet Russia and, finally, in post-Soviet Russia. In both Imperial and Soviet Russia the people who actually held the reins of power had a significant influence upon the ways in which religion and peace were portrayed. In post-Soviet Russia the increasingly fragmented nature of the nation and the recrudescence of Orthodoxy has also had a significant impact on the nature of cinematic portrayals. Obviously the filmmaker's vision and worldview helps to shape each distinctive depiction, but they are working within certain economic and specific political constraints. This needs to be borne in mind when reflecting over the three phases of filmmaking that I have described.

The newsreels produced during the last two decades of Imperial Russia reflect a vision of peace, which would be preserved through maintaining the status quo. The Russian Orthodox Church and its leaders, though rarely depicted, were inextricably connected with this hierarchical ordering of society. The dramas and documentaries produced in the years following the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 represent a very different vision of peace. It was to be achieved through a violent overturning of the old order and an ongoing conflict with the morally bankrupt leaders and beliefs embedded in most religions. During the seventy years of Soviet rule, Russian film further reflected the changing fortunes of religion and visions of what would make for peace. It is important to underline that this period was not cinematically void of religious depictions or motifs. For example, *The Ascent* (directed by Larisa Shepitko, 1976), reflects what Stephen Lovell describes as 'a harrowing account of captured partisans during World War Two that also has very

explicit Biblical motifs'. This can be seen in the fact that 'the hero is Christ-like', and that 'there is an 'ascent' to the scaffold.' Identifying not only Christ-figures, but also further explicit and implicit religious themes in Soviet films is beyond the scope of this paper but worthy of further consideration.

Following the downfall of the Soviet Regime, cinematic depictions of religion are changing dramatically. In sharp contrast to the 1920s and 1930s where Russian Orthodoxy was largely reviled, its priests and beliefs are now often portrayed far more sympathetically. Recent portrayals are even going beyond some of the more ambiguous and favourable depictions which emerged in the final years of Soviet Rule. We have seen how in several recent popular cinematic narratives, orthodox priests and monks are portrayed as guides or models of those searching for peace. Other religious traditions are also sometimes depicted in more favourable terms. In these recent Russian cinematic contexts religion is characterised as not an entirely divisive force, and more commonly as an agent for different kinds of peacemaking.

NOTES

1. I am particularly indebted to Professor Julian Graffy (Professor of Russian Literature and Cinema at University College London), as well as to Dr Stephen Lovell (King's College London), for their helpful advice on the topic of Religion and Film in Russia.
2. Bordwell, 2005: 8.
3. Bordwell, 2005: 181–2.
4. This can also be seen in television depictions such as the hugely popular eleven part series about a *Punishment Battalion* (2004) during the Second World War. The local priest not only fights with extraordinary bravery, but he also blesses his comrades before the final battle.

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