

## **Semiotics and Symbolism in the Orthodox Church Architecture**

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### **Abstract**

*The movement on restoration of the temples destroyed in Soviet period has begun from below, later local authorities became involved and, at last, the state program on restoration of temples has been adopted. There is a process of returning to the roots, to traditions: not only Orthodox churches, but also Catholic, Buddhist, as well as mosques are being restored. Each temple embodies religious idea in the architecture. Each architectural element comprises a certain symbol. The symbolics in architecture of an Orthodox church is difficult and many-sided. It expresses what directly cannot be represented - it is the terrestrial embodiment of the heavenly, spiritual, non hand-made, sacral. Unlike Catholic temples built according to the art style dominating during construction the Orthodox churches are built according to Orthodoxy symbolics. Thus, each element of an Orthodox church bears some information on the one the temple is devoted to, on some lines of the Orthodoxy and on many other aspects.*

*The architecture as any other art form, has its own language - it is the language of architectural forms. The sense and value of architectural forms can be understood, considering the temple in its idea as the house of God, a universe symbol of the terrestrial (profane) and sacral worlds touching. We will try to open process of originating and development of orthodox symbolics on wide historical material.*

**Keywords: Symbol, temple, tabernacle, god-given example, canon, form, apse, cross, dome, head, pillar, tent, subcage, belltower, belfry.**

## Introduction

Symbolism was the initial principle of the Christian cult, real objects were allocated with supernatural sense. All elements of a cult became symbols, allegories, found other, internal, secret value. The temple symbol in itself is a real connection of the earth and sky, material and spiritual, unity of the terrestrial and transcendental beginning of life. The symbol is the special sign representing sensual or spiritual reality which is understood not as such, but in wider, more general sense. The symbol always tells a story, expresses the whole system of abstract ideas. It is a riddle which needs to be solved.

## Methods

The architecture of the Christian temple has the background. In the Bible the tabernacle which was constructed by Moses on God's command, God-given on Mount Sinai is described: "Also they will build me a sanctuary, and I will live in the middle of it" (Ref. 25; 8) Also in the Bible the temple which was built by the tsar Solomon is described. The idea of construction goes from above, from God "The temple which was built by the tsar Solomon to the Lord, 60 elbows, 20 wide and 30 elbows high, and the ante church before the temple is 20 elbows long, according to width of the temple and 10 elbows wide before the temple" (3rd Tsar.6; 2,3) So, on a god-given example, architectural ratios of the sizes of the temple were established [1].

The first Christians suffered cruel persecution, in essence repeating the Way of the Cross and Jesus Christ's sufferings. After Christ was subjected to cruel tortures and crucified, not only the second temple, but also the city of Jerusalem has soon been destroyed (the temple of Solomon has been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, and the second temple has been built in 500 years B.C.). Prosecution of Christians has stopped only after the most important edict of the Roman emperors: Konstantine - about legitimation of Christianity (313 AD); and Feodosiy the First about transformation of Christianity into the state religion (380 AD) [4]. The cross which for Romans was the tool of cruel and painful execution became a symbol of victory over death and hell. The cross became a symbol of the great victim of Father and Son for the sake of saving the fallen and guilty human race. Transformation of Christianity into the state religion also has affected architecture of temples. There was necessary a construction of numerous temples with radical increase in their capacity, and also implanting of the new Christianity idea in architecture.

Russia in 988 has accepted Orthodoxy from Byzantium with already developed canons and symbols, both religious, and secular. After fall of Byzantium Russia became values successor of a great thousand-year civilization, the center of Orthodoxy. Christian symbols in Byzantium and in the countries of the Byzantine circle have become a peculiar rule of an era: in them not only difficult theological designs, but also ordinary elements of life were arranged. The cross was minted on coins, decorated an imperial diadem, was put on merchant letters and private letters [6]. The two-headed eagle, the coat of arms of modern Russia, a crown – Monomakh's heading, a scepter and the power – are also the Christian symbols of power.

The shown contradictions between Orthodoxy and Catholicism have led in 1054 to the final division of Christian church. These ideological contradictions were shown in architecture of temples and symbolized everyone the idea. So in Central, Western and Northern Europe the dominating place is taken by the constructions of basilican style borrowed from Rome while

in the areas of Orthodoxy distribution which have adopted Christianity from Byzantium, churches represent dome centric constructions [3].

With fall of Byzantium Russia was the only orthodox state which has defended the independence. Ivan III has got married with the daughter of the brother of the last Byzantine emperor Sofya Paleolog, having become as the sort of successor for the Byzantine monarchs. Process "Moscow – the Third Rome" which has been formulated by the monk of one of the Pskov monasteries Filofey in the message to Vasily III has come to the end with the theory. The theory has been accepted by church, temporal power and society. Russia became the center of Orthodoxy. However temples of Russia, answering canons, differed from temples of Byzantium.

The first detailed statement of symbolics of the Christian temple in relation to sense of liturgy is attributed to patriarch Herman Konstantinopolsky. The patriarch has for the first time aggregated separate interpretation of the church building, its parts, having specified that the temple is the terrestrial sky in which God lives. The quadrangular throne meant that all four ends of the earth meet the Christ's doctrine. The apse corresponded to the Bethlehem cave where Christ was born, and a cave where he was buried. Therefore it was given the semicircular form. The temple has to be turned to the east towards Jerusalem where the second coming of Christ was expected. On the left side an altar is arranged with a throne, but of the smaller size, than a throne in an altar on which God sits. East part of the temple began to be separated by low wall or a colonnade, and apertures between columns veiled by fabric. The separated bema has found symbolical value of paradise. There was gradually a canon of architectural appearance of the temple, its parts, sizes, functions and symbols. Main parts of the temple: an entrance on a church porch, a church porch, a northern portal, the western portal, the southern portal, an altar, the High place, the main altar, a vestry, side-altars. The temple carried out functions: eucharistic, memorial, baptisal. The sizes of the temple were defined according to the macrolinear module, multiple to one of the Byzantine orgies (Orgies of Byzantium are equal to 6, 7, 8 and 10 feet) this sample is imprinted in Saint Sofia's temple in Constantinople which became a sample for Sofia Kiyevskaya, Novgorod and other temples of Russia and the countries of the Byzantine circle [4].

The Tithe church which began to be built in a year after adoption of Christianity, financed by the tenth part of the princely income was the first temple built in Russia. The basis of the Byzantine church cross and dome with three naves and three apses is the basis for a constructive planning solution of church. The church was built by "masters from the Greek". The construction is destroyed in case of the Horde invasion. In the period of Vladimir rule in Russia about 20 temples were known, and by the end of Yaroslav the Wise rule there were about one thousand. When Yaroslav has built Sofia Kiyevskaya, Saint Irene and Saint Georgy's temples, Kiev began to be compared with Constantinople [5]. The Byzantine masters have faced problems of a dome construction. First of all, with lack of many construction materials components, and also with climatic conditions and other problems. Instead of a dome cupola as a peculiar kind of a dome appeared. The dome in architecture of the Byzantine church symbolized the sky. Replacement of a dome with cupola has led to partial change of symbolics. If the dome is a symbol of the sky, then cupola began to be seen as Christian dogma. One cupola symbolizes Jesus Christ; two cupolas symbolize two natures - divine and human in Jesus Christ; three cupolas - a symbol of three persons of Saint Trinity; five cupolas – Jesus Christ and four evangelists; seven cupolas – seven sacraments and seven

Ecumenical councils; nine cupolas – nine angelic hosts; 13 cupolas – Jesus Christ and 12 apostles; 25 cupolas – 24 aged men and the Virgin; 33 cupolas – number of terrestrial years of Christ the Redeemer [6]. All cupolas were adorned with a cross, the main symbol of Christianity (fig. 1.). A cross was Christ's symbol and ways which he commanded. Jesus Christ was not only Christ the Redeemer of mankind, but also the intermediary, a link between the world heavenly and terrestrial.

After overthrow of a 240-year Horde yoke revival of Russia has begun. Moscow became the political and cultural center of lands. Sobornaya Square with the Assumption Cathedral constructed by the architect Aristotle Fiorovanti, a tomb of the Russian metropolitans and patriarchs, the place of weddings and crownings of grand dukes, then tsars and emperors became the center of the Kremlin (fig. 2). As a sample for the first-throned temple of Moscow ancient Assumption Cathedral of the city of Vladimir has served. Thereof, the motives of Vladimiro-Suzdalsky architecture forgotten in the period of yoke [7] were brightly reflected in Assumption Cathedral of the Kremlin.

The Arkhangelsk temple which has also been built by Italian architect Aleviz Nov (fig. 3) became the second-large temple after Assumption Cathedral. The cathedral is built on the place of the ancient Archangel's Cathedral constructed during reign of Ivan Kalita. Its available traditions and succession are visible. The Arkhangelsk collection since Ivana Kalita was a tomb of grand Moscow dukes and tsars. In total 54 burials in a cathedral [7].

In the center of Sobornaya Square Ivan the Great Bell Tower is situated (fig. 4). This pillar has served as an example, for creating a set the column-like temples which have channelized special in architecture. The pillar is connected with names of the grand dukes fighting for consolidation of the country, overthrowing the yoke and an eminence of the Russian state – Ivan Kalita, Ivan III, Ivan IV. Samples of traditional ancient temples were enriched with new decisions and details. The Russian masters comprehended secrets of skill and built masterpieces of temple construction in a stone. At the beginning of the 15th century there was a peculiar only to Moscow way of building temples, volume-plannedg decisions were introduced. These are cathedrals of Zvenigorod, Trinity Cathedral of Trinity-Sergius Lavra, Andronikov Monastery Spassky Cathedral. The main lines of temple architecture in the 15th century is a 3-nave, triapsidal, one-dome planning system. Pyramid-like erected centric composition provided with putting the temple on a high substage symbolized eminence of church over the world. The decorative system of kokoshniks with keeled outlines emphasizing raising step arches of a crossing over a drum - an ascension to heaven symbol where the God's Throne is located. The cross of the crossed arches over the temple also had symbolical value. The church of Ascension in the village Kolomna in an ancestral lands of the tsar Vasily III, built in honor of the heir birth - future Ivan IV - became the first temple monument. In spirit-raising verticality of the temple of Ascension many authors see optimistic influence of Russian rise in the middle of the 16th century. The temple is crowned by a stone tent form. Tent architecture is the phenomenon entirely original, having no analogy in architecture of other countries and people [8].

Other striking example – Holy Trinity Cathedral on the Ditch, or as was begun to be called later – the St. Basil's Cathedral constituted from new original types of the churches which were born in the 16th century. The design of the temple means domination, protection and aegis of the Virgin over all Christ's Church and over the Russian land. The tent in the Russian

temple-building symbolizes a shade which from an extreme antiquity was built over the holy site as a sign of its God-protection and sanctity. The throne in honor of the Protection of the Holy Virgin is placed in the central tent temple which unites other chapters, as if collecting them around itself. The temple became Russia visiting card, its architectural symbol.

In the 17th century the construction of temples "under bells" begins, combining church and a belltower in one. These churches are multistoreyed with a hill of kokoshniks on top in the form of the nimbus or flame symbolizing fiery heavenly forces, the Lord's fiery throne. Majority of such temples are five-domed [8]. Belfries were built on over temples, and belltowers were built separately and usually had several apertures so the sound was freely carried on long distances. Bell-ringing – important part of Christian religious ceremonies. Bells ring time of wedding and burial service, ring big church holidays, ring in weekdays, announcing the beginning of church service (fig. 5). Up to the beginning of the XX century bells were used in the secular purposes, warning about danger. Vibration from the bells sound could destroy both a belltower, and all church. When builders have not been sure of the base, the belltower was built separately from the building.

The church in Russia regulated and dictated the laws not only to the authorities, but also to all population, influenced society, first of all, on the spiritual life. Everything was regulated: from family relations to meal (observance of fasting).

Monastic life was a role model. Monasteries were also important architectural symbol, they symbolized the Heavenly Jerusalem. 1054 the Kyiv Pechersk monastery has been founded. By the 17th century in Russia there were about 800 monasteries. To planning of monasteries began to dictated not by defensive, but initial requirements. They consisted in symbolics of "the Heavenly City of Jerusalem" which in the Apocalypse is described as follows: "The city is a quadrangle, and length its same as well as width" (Otkr.21; 16). Serf nature of monasteries image symbolized the spiritual fortress of Orthodoxy. The planning scheme of monasteries - binary character, representative and economic. The entrance to representative part was carried out through Sacred gate which was built before the gateway temple. Such architecture is common only to Russia.

Change of symbols in religion does not always take place peacefully. Split of the Russian church - one of the tragic pages in our history. In 1656 a church cathedral have approved replacement of a two-fingered sign of the cross with three-fingered. Two fingers – a symbol of the dual nature of Christ, three – are a symbol of the Holy Trinity. Some doctrines have changed – triple exclamation "hallelujah" instead of double, and during church service people now went "protivisolon" (against the sun). Acts of self-immolation of Old Believers and their flight on suburbs of the country and abroad have begun. Consequences of Split are felt still. To local councils in 1971 have removed an anathema from old ceremonies [9].

Even construction materials are symbolical. A stone – is the Lord. Isaiah called the Lord "stumbling block", "the stone tested, precious ... believing in him won't feel ashamed" [1]. (The bible, Isaiah's Book, chapter 28:16). The stone symbolizes strong faith in the Lord. A tree – a life tree, the main symbol of Christianity – a cross on which Jesus Christ has been crucified has been made of it. Particles of a cross were carried by followers of the Christ doctrine, turning the people into Christian belief and building temples.

## **Conclusions**

Thus, we have considered symbolics of external architecture of the temple where the temple is an image of the world, the house of God, a prayer in a stone, sense of the main idea of Orthodoxy. We have considered the architectural symbolics of an Orthodox church developing throughout more than two millennia and which has not lost the importance up till now. Moreover, the orthodox and cultural wealth imprinted in symbols is very significant for our people today. We revive it, and we recover temples. Symbols play a huge role in society, they need to be known, understood and honored. Disrespect for symbols of any belief can lead to unpredictable consequences.

## **Summary**

In the conclusion there is a wish to stop once again on discrepancy of symbolics. On one hand, images are given as something specific, evident and direct, and on the other – they bear inexhaustible semantic loading. The temple remains the temple, you will not mistake it for anything else. It is a real embodiment of idea of the era. Ideas which were significant for mankind at a certain historical stage. Temples of Egypt, Maya temples, the Pantheon in Rome, Parthenon in Greece are of huge interest as the creation of architecture and art, and as a real symbol of idea which has inspired ancient architects on creating these masterpieces as time imprinted in a stone, it is a riddle which people of modern era are to solve.

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## Figures

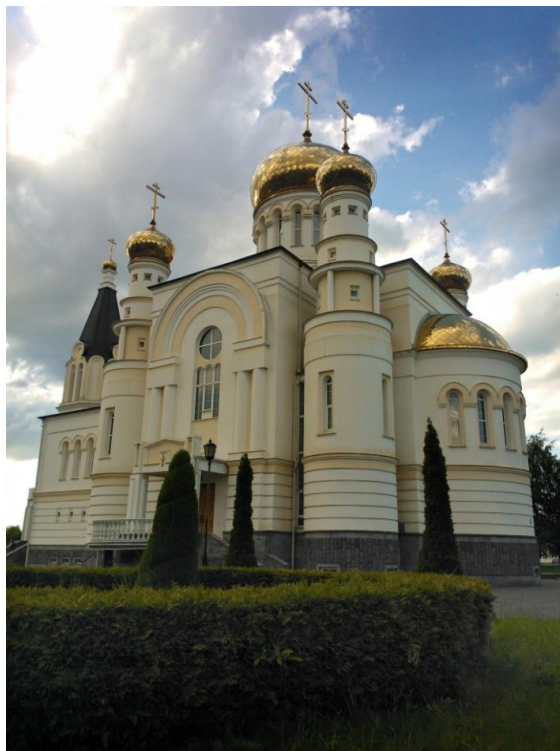


Fig 1. The five-dome temple of Saint Georgy of the Vladikavkaz city symbolizes Jesus Christ and four Evangelists: Matfey, Mark, Luka, Ioann.



Fig. 2. Dormition Cathedral.





Fig. 3. Archangel's Cathedral.



Fig. 4. Ivan the Great Bell Tower.

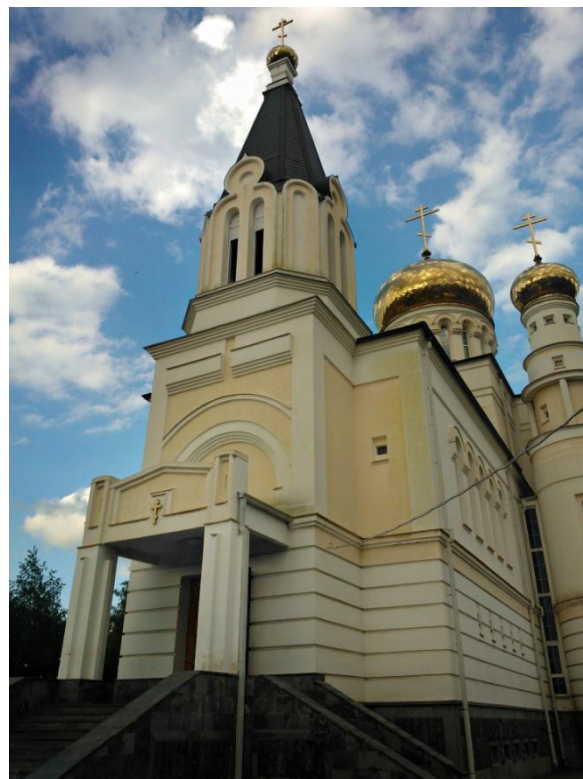


Fig. 5. A belfry in Saint Georgy's temple of the Vladikavkaz city having a tent covering. Bell-ringing is a prayer in a sound.