

MSC 2020**International Scientific and Practical Conference «MAN. SOCIETY.
COMMUNICATION»****THE MONASTERY IN “THE LIFE OF MATVEI KOZHEMYAKIN”
BY M. GORKY**

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Abstract

The article offers a study of the Maxim Gorky concept of rational religiosity (God-Building) in the novel “The Life of Matvei Kozhemyakin” by Maxim Gorky. The novel contains two distinct artistic plans: traditions and innovations. The genre, thematic, interpretative (the perception of the monastery as a model of heaven on earth and as a battlefield between good and evil forces) traditions are combined with the author’s insertions which in the described accentuate social contradictions, acquiring an exaggerated character in the monastery, and desacralize the monastery’s space by means of escalating details with a negative connotation in the description of the monastery daily life. In the aspect of the God-Building concept consecutively propounded by Maxim Gorky, the theme of the monastery sounds unique. From the point of view of Gorky as a collectivist, a monastery (monos – “lonely, solitary”) is neither a way nor a place to comprehend the meaning of a person’s own existence. The writer treats with trepidation both the monastery as a centuries-old tradition of organizing human shared living and monks who traditionally evoked a feeling of genuine respect among common people. However, the model of the monastery, exposed to artistic desacralization in the novel, is perceived by M. Gorky as non-constructive, requiring transformation into other forms of social existence, where the people themselves, their strength and the spirit which are transforming the world would become the basis for building a new – harmonious and fair – social world order.

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Keywords: Desacralization, God-Building, Maxim Gorky, monastery, tradition



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1. Introduction

The attitude of Maxim Gorky towards Christianity was complicated. According to Spiridonova (2018), “the true faith of the writer throughout his life has been “a human worship” (p. 218). At the same time, in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, a value crisis was felt that caused the desire of the Russian intelligentsia to find “new religious meanings and symbols” that “influence social trends” (Bykov, 2012, p. 84). The process was expressed, on the one hand, in God-Seeking, which became “an original worldview, a system of views on the world and the possibilities of knowing it” (Emelyanov, 2016, p. 245), and on the other hand, in God-Building: socialism as the future religion of humanity, “which will free the whole world from Poverty and the Power of Wealth” (Choni, 2019, p. 1). These value orientations were determined by the revolutionary events of 1917, and “regardless of modern assessments given by the Great Russian Revolution, it coincided with the beginning of a new period in world history” (Akul’shin & Grebenkin, 2019, p. 299). The idea of God-Building was expressed in the story “Confession” (1908), where Gorky figuratively expressed the idea of “God Creating” (Scherr, 2000), “the most radical attempt in his entire life to create his own philosophy” (Arias-Vihil, 2017, p. 315-316). This concept of rational religiosity influenced all further work of the writer. It also manifested itself in the novel about Russian national life in its historical retrospective, “The Life of Matvei Kozhemyakin,” which can be defined as the history of “Okurov Rus” (Semenova, 2003, p. 7).

2. Problem Statement

The objective of this article was to study the concept of rational religiosity in the novel “The Life of Matvei Kozhemyakin”, one of the most revealing texts that actualize this problem.

3. Research Questions

The research question formulated in this work concerned the specifics of implementing the concept of rational religiosity within the framework of the monastery theme, which is revealed in the novel at the plot level, in the characteristics of personages, in artistic means of text.

4. Purpose of the Study

The research hypothesis is that, in connection with the specifics of the novel (it is most closely related to the traditions of Russian literature, in particular, the Old Russian period (Semenova & Tereshkina, 2019), the sought-for answers to the question about the specificity of the writer’s views on traditional Christianity, the church, the rituals and lifestyle associated with church and monastic life of people, who are one way or another involved in this ritualism, can be obtained in their direct expression, being transmitted through characters congenial to the author in worldview, as well as through the author’s position postulated in the text.

5. Research Methods

To solve the research problem, comparative-historical, historical-typological, hermeneutic-interpretational methods, as well as the method of descriptive poetics were applied.

6. Findings

At all times the monastery was perceived as a constructed by man (first of all, by faith ascetics) model of paradise, lost by man for his sins. The monasteries became places not only for the spiritual salvation of their inhabitants, but also places of splendor and “God’s grace” in all respects, revealing the possibility of a beautiful (pious) arrangement of human life. At the same time, the monastery, as the creation of human hands, always remained a bipolar phenomenon, where trials and temptations did not disappear, where holiness coexisted with worldly lusts and cares, and where the concentration of evil forces was stronger, the souls of God’s pleasers were more desirable for the “demons”. It is evidenced by many works of Old Russian literature (“Kiev Pechersky Patericon”), almost all hagiographic literature (Isidorova, 2019; Rudi, 2006); in the same vein there is a description of the Vorgorodsky monastery in the novel by M. Gorky “The Life of Matvei Kozhemyakin”, widely reflecting Old Russian literary traditions. In the novel, the monastery theme is presented in many aspects. It should be noted that the word “monk (nun)”, by all means, has positive connotations. Gorky uses it when he gives a description or characterizes those personages who are clearly attractive to him. The father addresses the main character of the story – Matvei: “You are a nun’s son...” (Gorky, 1971, p. 149); when describing Yevgenia Petrovna Mansurova, the author remarks: “A tall woman in a dark dress stood on the porch, smoothly combed, pale and strict, like a nun” (Gorky, 1971, p. 277). In this sense, M. Gorky is in line with the hagiographic tradition, in which the names of persons of church clergy have always been chosen from the lexical-semantic group with a positive connotation (for example, successive changes in the usage of word “priestling (“pop” – in Russian)” to the word “priest” as more appropriate for hagiographic style in “Life (zhitie – in Russian) of Stefan Permsky” as amended in the printed Prologue of 1643 if compared to the previous edition (Dukhanina, 2019, pp. 37-38).

Many works of Old Russian literature (and, first of all, undoubtedly, the hagiographic genre) describe a somewhat detached and condemningly surprised attitude of the laity to monks. The very word “inok” (cenobite) (another, different from the others) in Russian society, which at all times placed the collective above the individual, expresses an attitude to a monk as living in a parallel world, incomprehensible to other people (see, for example, a description of God pleasing life in “The Life of Gennady Kostromsky” (Soboleva, 2019), “The Life of Nikon Radonezhsky” (Pak, 2017). “Monk” qualities in the characters of M. Gorky become, definitely, a positive assessment of those who are alien to Okurov routine, where social, religious and ethical indifference reigns. In this characteristic, the characters’ detachment from Okurovchina and opposition to it is evident.

The function of the monastery is shown ambivalently by M. Gorky. On the one hand, church adepts go there (mother of the protagonist), on the other hand, this is a place where you can hide from problems (a young female singer from monastery choir, the Elder John, and the protagonist himself). It is noteworthy that such a desacralization of the monastery as a “holy place”, its use for narrowly personal, sometimes mercenary purposes, is not reflected in the “etiquette” (official) genres of Old Russian literature (lives,

paterikas, legends about shrines), which, undoubtedly, needs no explanation. However, in the Old Russian writings, there is evidence that the monastery sometimes became only a battlefield for the secular interests of people who accidentally fell into it. We are talking about an interesting monument of the epistolary genre “The Message to the Cyril-Belozersky Monastery” by Ivan the Terrible of the year 1573, in which the Tsar not only sneeringly (as was typical for him in correspondence) answers the clergy, but also reduces the very situation of being in the monastery and the indecent behavior of his former boyars Ivan Sheremetjev and Vasily Sobakin to the tomfooling. The involuntary desacralization of the monastery as a holy place was reflected in the language of the royal message, which was perceived in Old Russia as a literary work, and not as a document of business correspondence. The monastery as a place of battle, especially spiritual one, is one of the main topics in Russian literature, and not only of ancient, but also of new time.

This theme can be traced in the description of the life path of the protagonist of the novel by M. Gorky “The Life of Matvei Kozhemyakin”. Matvei was seven years old when his mother “disappeared from home: she did not die, but simply one night secretly went off somewhere” (Gorky, 1971, p. 127). The boy remembered “an obscure sketch ... of a thin figure, the shy glare of dark eyes, the hasty movements of small swarthy hands – they always hid fearfully” (Gorky, 1971, p. 127). The father told his son: “Your mother – she, brother, was smart! A quiet clever girl. And she understood everything, she felt so sorry for everyone, which is true - she had nowhere to put herself but to lock herself in the monastery. Well, she locked herself ...” (Gorky, 1971, p. 148). The righteous life of people like Matvei’s mother was explained simply: “Every family has a speck, and, thus, in each family there is a monk or a nun, or the old she-hermit who pray for forgiveness of ancient sins” (Gorky, 1971, p. 150).

The image of a young female choir singer, whom Matvei really liked, is ambiguous: “she reminded Palaga with her humble gaze” (Gorky, 1971, p. 256), and his mother, “who, pitying all people, went into the dense forests to pray for them and, maybe, already died, exhausted by prayer...” (Gorky, 1971, p. 257). The girl “looked like a small bell tower, with a sincere silver ringing calling people to the world, to a quiet and loving life” (Gorky, 1971, p. 257). The author says that for the protagonist “it seemed that one day a woman would throw everything dark from her shoulders and appear before people beautiful and pure, like a white swan of a fairy tale, appear and, extending strong hands to people, would say with the voice of Vasilisa the Wise: “I am the mother of all things!” Then everyone will be ashamed, ashamed to tears of repentance, and all, worshiping her wise beauty, will renew life with the light power of love” (Gorky, 1971, p. 257). However, this image exalted in Matvei’s view gets a completely different revelation: the girl suddenly disappears, and then it becomes known that she was arrested in the brother by brother murder case. The choir singer Katerina was the bride of the eldest son, and the future father-in-law “sent her ... to the monastery ... for safety”, but in Okurov they said, “it was not without sin that she was there: it looked like she had had an affair with her future father-in-law. She was an orphan; in orphanhood everything is possible...” (Gorky, 1971, p. 258). Listening to the cook’s story about Katerina, “Matvei stood at the door holding on to the jambs, as though crucified” (Gorky, 1971, p. 258), refusing to believe what he had just heard. The author uses an even more lowered image of the monastery and withdrawal to the monastery as a hopeless life scenario for revealing the image of Marfa Posulova: “For women like her, childless and stupid ..., there are two ways – either to the monastery or to the lechery house” (Gorky, 1971, p. 563).

The image of the Elder John is the key to the story. The author describes him, emphasizing the external decency: “The bright, sharp eyes, and the old man’s face, noble, calm, as if carved from a cypress tree, immediately and for a long time remained in memory with its impressive resemblance to the clear, kind faces of the new “Fryaz” manner of icon painting” (Gorky, 1971, p. 486). However, a comparison with the icon - “dark, he seemed like an icon in a rich icon case ... and the blond-haired and ruddy cell-man, reminiscent of an angel, reinforced the impression of holiness” (Gorky, 1971, p. 487) – reduces the meaning: the preacher is as indifferent to those who pray as the icon, which in the novel is drawn as an attribute of Okurov’s life.

The negative connotations have details: the old man smiled with a “round smile”, spoke “comfortingly” and “always the same thing: about meekness, patience, love and always neatly until half-past five” (Gorky, 1971, pp. 488-489). The author focuses on the formalization of the preaching of Elder John (Semenova & Tereshkina, 2019).

The Elder John from the Gorky novel had a prototype. In his youth Gorky met John of Kronstadt, but this meeting disappointed the young man who never received answers to his questions. Gorky shows that monasticism is often a comfortable niche for nobles who, under the conditions of socio-economic transformations, have lost social guidelines for self-realization. Thanks to Tiunov, Matvei Kozhemyakin learns that the monk is an Okurov nobleman, an officer, “a nimble warrior” Ippolit Voevodin. Tiunov voiced the author’s conviction about the reasons for his withdrawal to the monastery: “I think it is because there’s nothing to eat ... Today, a nobleman has two ways: either becoming a monk or a card player – they are called cardsharppers” (Gorky, 1971, pp. 492-493). At the same time, the class aspect of the problem is important for Gorky, since Tiunov convinces the interlocutor that “they always strive to give a nobleman either a place of a preacher or the elder, because he will not betray ... this secret mechanics” (Gorky, 1971, p. 493).

Tiunov expresses the author’s conviction that “people need to be taught resistance, not patience without any sense, it is necessary to instill in them love for the cause, for the deed!” (Gorky, 1971, p. 496). The main character of the novel finds oneself in the Vorgorodsky monastery also because of “nowhere else to go”. He painted a nice picture of how he, gray-haired and gracious, full of peace and quiet love for people, sits like Elder John on the porch, exuding gentle, humble words from his soul”. And even though the protagonist was reproached by the thought: “So – and I am away from people, like everyone else?”, he convinced himself: “It’s calm here. Especially if you make a big contribution” (Gorky, 1971, p. 490). After meeting Tiunov, the protagonist moves from the monastery to the town, and then takes a firm decision to return to Okurov: “Tomorrow I will go. Alone, well, alone, I am accustomed to it! It is more than enough, I’ve been hanging out here, like an empty grain in cereals for two months already” (Gorky, 1971, p. 512). This plot move is extremely important in the life of the protagonist, who will not gain family happiness and mutual love, but will be able to benefit his fellow countrymen from Okurov, bequeathing all his fortune to the town. The monastic life is revealed in the images of two monasteries: the Okurov district monastery, whose garden borders the main character’s garden, and the district monastery in Vorgorod, where Matvei Kozhemyakin hides after the scandal with the janitor Maxim.

The “quiet monastery” (Gorky, 1971, p. 140) in Okurov is part of Okurov’s vulgar and joyless existence. “The best people of the city prayed in the monastery” (Gorky, 1971, p. 151), and in childhood

Matvei did not visit it. As an adult, he attends monastery services, and he knows the life of the monastery. This life is not without joy: “Two female voices sang quietly in the monastery garden. One voice, as thin as a silk thread, was mournfully unfolding: “Open uuup ...” And the other, thicker and stronger, echoed: “Open uuup for me...” Then the singing women laughed loudly.” (Gorky, 1971, pp. 174-175). Normal life flows there: “Beds were being dug in the monastery garden, young laughter and the talk of female gardeners was heard” (Gorky, 1971, p. 269). Moreover, “the whole city knew that they were frolicking in the monastery; when drunk, the police officer Nogaitsev claimed that he knew a nun whose breasts were extremely uneven: one weighs five funts and the other six and a quarter. But after all, “without sinning, you will not repent, without repenting, you will not be saved”, they are frolicking for themselves and pray day and night for the whole world” (Gorky, 1971, p. 308). Therefore, it is not surprising that Matvei was handed a note from the monastery with an invitation to a date. And if the protagonist is driven by curiosity, then the female wanderer Raisa is driven by lust. “By height and gait, he (Matvei – *A.S., D.B.*) immediately guessed” who this woman was. She was “over the years and a heavy drinker,” ... for a long time already her small, swollen eyes ... sweetly squinted at meetings, and an annoying grin was spreading across her yellow face like butter on a hot pancake” (Gorky, 1971, p. 309). The protagonist feels bitterness and shame, and does everything to go unnoticed.

The Vorgorodsky monastery has a different status (“the rich monastery in the name of Elijah the Prophet” has firmly grown into the earth” (Gorky, 1971, p. 485)) not only because of its location, but also thanks to the Elder John, whose sermons attract a large number of believers to the monastery. But the author depicts the routine life of the monastery in a lowered down manner, emphasizing the spiritless, mundane state of the inhabitants of the monastery: “A three-day holiday which had gathered thousands of people here was over; tight after-holiday boredom embraced the monastery. Around the courtyard, in resinous heat, like flies on a glass, tired, angry monks are crawling... >. The novices are cleaning the courtyard polluted by praying pilgrims, are washing the vast premises of dormitories and hotels; dust, crusts of bread, clods of crumpled oiled paper are falling down lazily from the windows, water splashes and immediately evaporates on the stone of the courtyard heated by the sun. <...> A large hospitable household restores the disturbed order; the monks are spinning in a lazy, tired bustle ... ” (Gorky, 1971, pp. 485-486). Whatever the monastery and its unique statutes and customs might be, this “divine place” cannot escape the routine and futility of human life – it is even more obvious against the background of the expectations of a lay person to see something that is not characteristic of common life. There is no ideal place and ideal person on earth - such is the clear and devoid of illusion conclusion of the novel.

7. Conclusion

A monastery for Gorky, judging by the theme of the monastery implemented in the novel “The Life of Matvei Kozhemyakin”, is just a big prosperous household. The desacralization of the space of the Vorgorodsky monastery, performed in the manner of the New Age literature (and in the Gorky manner), is generally in the same mode as this desacralization (reflecting the objective dual unity of human nature) took place in Old Russian literature: the monastery cannot be an absolute salvation from sin just as there can be no paradise on earth, nor can it be “a kind dream” in which man is saved. The whole earth, granted to man by God as a resident of His Kingdom, should become paradise, and the main location of paradise is

the soul of man, in which the Kingdom of Heaven should be placed. With this thought, the main character of the story dies; his death is so similar to the assumption of saints in the Russian hagiographic tradition.

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