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Russian Orthodox Churches “Under the Bells”: Semantic Features and Origin of the Worldview

The religious foundations underlying the construction of Russian Orthodox churches “under the bells”, and the meaning and role of this notion, are analyzed with reference to the traditional worldview. Architectural features of such churches are described. They belong to a rare type, and have been constructed in Russia from the 14th century to the present time. Their multiple meanings, influenced by Byzantine and European traditions, related to the key Orthodox notions, are analyzed. The most basic of these was the idea of the ladder, symbolizing spiritual growth, as evidenced by dedication of churches “under the bells” to the Stylites, to preachers developing key Orthodox notions, and to converts engaged in spiritual maturation, as well as to miracles believed to influence human life in a profound way. Dedications to miracles and miraculous icons, associated with military glory, and to canonized warriors, patrons of the military, are based on the idea of the victorious and life-giving cross. The image of the bell as a divine messenger is embodied in the tradition of placing bells right above the liturgical space, making perception of the “voice of God” by the flock more direct. A conclusion is reached that the pillar-like edifices of churches “under the bells” represent the most meaningful elements of the Russian worldview, marking the Orthodox cultural landscape, whose central idea is that of spiritual maturation and triumphant Christian faith.

Keywords: Churches “under the bells”, semantics, worldview, symbols, cultural landscape, Orthodoxy, dedication of the altar.

Introduction

The traditionality of Russian Orthodox church buildings is a fundamental research issue associated with various material and spiritual aspects of culture. As cult buildings and places of worship, churches constitute an integral part of the cultural landscape, which provides the materialized historical basis for a specific ethnic and cultural area. As religious institutions, churches embody spiritual and ethnic core of historical cultural tradition of people. Church buildings play an important role in shaping the worldview of ethnic communities by setting people’s strategies and behavior patterns.

All this forces us to address carefully specific aspects of the emerging and functioning of various types of churches. The typological diversity of Russian Orthodox churches includes some rare types, such as churches “under the bells”, which have a belfry level. This article is the first comprehensive study of the spiritual and religious principles behind the creation of Russian churches “under the bells”, based on a specially developed author’s methodology that makes it possible to analyze the data taking into account not only architectural features of churches, but also their altar dedications. The array of information about churches “under the bells” was assembled from the author’s field

materials, published sources, the database “Churches of Russia” (<http://temples.ru>), Sobory.ru, collections in the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture, and the Corpus of Architectural Monuments and Monumental Art of Russia (<http://svodokn.ru/>).

Churches “under the bells” in their historical context

Churches “under the bells” show some architectural features that unite them into a separate type known only in Rus and Russia. Regardless of the building material of walls or style (Moscow style, or imitations of Western Baroque, Classicism, Eclecticism, or Russian-Byzantine style), these have a compact area, a pillar-like appearance, and a division into levels. The level of the bells is located above the main space of the church, directly below the dome. Such structures can be considered the predecessors of hipped churches (Wagner, 1995: 23; Istoriya..., 1994: 311). Many churches “under the bells” are well known. The list of them, although far from being complete, gives us a general idea of their altar dedications.

The first church “under the bells” was the Church of St. John Climacus in the Moscow Kremlin, built in 1329 and rebuilt as the bell tower of Ivan the Great in the 17th century (Ukazatel..., 1916: 18–19). In the 15th–17th centuries, the following churches were built: the church dedicated to the Descent of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity-Sergius Lavra, that dedicated to Archangel Gabriel (later known as St. George’s Bell Tower) in Kolomenskoye, two churches in the bell tower of the Novodevichy Convent in Moscow (one under the bell tower, dedicated to Sts. Barlaam and Joasaph, the other on its middle level, dedicated to the Holy Apostle John the Theologian (Ibid.)), the church dedicated to the Crucifixion of Christ in Aleksandrovsкая Sloboda (Svod pamyatnikov..., 2004), that dedicated to the Annunciation in the Ferapontov Monastery, that dedicated to Archangel Gabriel in the Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery, that dedicated to the Three Hierarchs in the Prilutsky Monastery, that dedicated to the Holy Prophet Elijah in the village of Teykovo (Ivanovo Region), and that dedicated to the Ascension of the Lord in the Snetogorsk Convent in Pskov.

In the 18th century, there appeared the church dedicated to Symeon the Stylite in the Moscow Danilov Monastery above the Holy Gates, the gate church dedicated to Sts. Zechariah and Elisabeth (Antonova, 2016), and the church dedicated to the Tikhvin Icon of the Mother of God above the Holy (Northern) Gates of the Moscow Donskoy Monastery.

In the 19th century, the churches of St. John Climacus (Donskoy Monastery) in Moscow, the Holy Martyr Youth

Maximilian (later known as the “Great Chrysostom”) in Yekaterinburg, the Holy Warrior Theodore Stratilates at the Menshikov Tower in Moscow, and the Exaltation of the True and Life-Giving Cross of the Lord in the village of Vozdvizhenskoye near the Trinity-Sergius Lavra were built.

In the late 20th century, active construction of churches recommenced after a long break. In 1995–2006 and 1999, two churches were built dedicated to the Holy Martyr Grand Duchess Elisabeth in the village of Opalikha in the town of Krasnogorsk in Moscow Region, one dedicated to St. Innocent, Metropolitan of Moscow in Beskudnikovo in Moscow (1997–2005), and one to the Life-Giving Holy Trinity in the village of Ershovo in Odintsovsky District of Moscow Region (1999).

In the 21st century, churches “under the bells”, dedicated to St. George the Victorious in the Donskoy Monastery (2000) (Vostryshhev, Rogozina, Svetozarsky, 2005: 54–55), St. Alexis, Metropolitan of Moscow in the village of Toporkovo in Moscow Region (2001–2002), Great Martyr Panteleimon the Healer at the Central Military Clinical Hospital of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation in Moscow (2003–2004), St. Sergius of Radonezh and Holy Martyr Great Duchess Elisabeth in Yekaterinburg (2007–2014), and Holy Martyr and Warrior Victor of Damascus in the city of Kotelniki in Moscow Region (2009–2011) were built. There are plans to build a church dedicated to the Prudent Robber Rakh in St. Petersburg.

Siberian churches “under the bells” are much less known. In the Irkutsk Diocese, in the 18th–19th centuries, churches with one of the altars under the belfry level were built. An example is the church of Sts. Procopius and John, the Ustyug Wonderworkers (1740–1767), with the altar dedicated to Archangel Michael on the lower level of the bell tower (Kalinina, 2000: 137–138). The church of the Intercession of the Most Holy Theotokos and Presentation of the Lord (early 19th century) had three altars: the altar under the bell tower was dedicated to Holy Martyr Hermolaus of Nicomedia (Ibid.: 134–135). However, owing to the placement of altars under the level of the bells, they cannot be fully considered traditional churches “under the bells”. In terms of their structural features, only two churches of the Irkutsk Diocese—the wooden Transfiguration church (in the camps) and the stone church of St. Innocent—can be described as churches “under the bells”. The church of the Transfiguration of the Lord was built in the area of military camps in the 1880–1890s (Ibid.: 148). It was a centric tiered building with a tent-like ending of the belfry level. A mission center and church dedicated to St. Innocent, Bishop of Irkutsk, appeared in 1884–1890 in the village of Alar, where a Buddhist datsan functioned in the 19th century (Ibid.: 169).

The ladder as a pillar of spiritual perfection

The analysis revealed several closely interrelated features in the architectural structure, placement, and reasons for building and dedicating churches “under the bells”, which were associated with ideologically rich religious mythologemes. Noteworthy is the dedication of the first church “under the bells” to St. John Climacus, called John of the Ladder from the title of his work “The Ladder of Divine Ascent” (“The Ladder of Paradise”) (see (Prepodobniy Ioann Lestvichnik..., 2013)). In his book, the path of ascending the “ladder of spiritual perfection” is described as the ideal of monastic life. The image of the ladder is associated with the need for perfecting on the path to God and gradual ascent along the way as if taking steps. One of the many examples of the image of a ladder in Holy Scripture as a path to the palace of God is the vision of Jacob: “And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And behold, the Lord stood above it... And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not’. And he was afraid, and said, ‘How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven’” (Gen. 28:12–17). In the Patristic literature, the idea of gradual adoption of virtuous life is illustrated by the argument that first one “must place their foot upon the first steps and from there always mount upon the next, until by a gradual progress they have ascended to the height attainable by human nature” (see (Svyatitel Vasilii Velikiy..., 2014: 9)) (Fig. 1). According to some testimonies, the dying words of N.V. Gogol were: “Ladder, give me a ladder” (see (Yakutskiye eparkhialnye vedomosti, 1889: 384)). Is not it possible that he meant the ladder of spiritual development, which leads to heaven?

The idea of monastic asceticism is clearly manifested in the iconography of images of Sts. Symeon, Alypius, and Daniel the Stylites. Icons with the images of the Holy Stylites have been painted since the times of early Christianity. The tradition of their creation came to Rus through Byzantium ca the 13th century. A Stylite with a scroll, cross, or book was depicted in monastic garb, on a pillar, which in some cases had a ladder interpreted as a symbol of ascension from the teaching of John Climacus (Simeon Stolpnik..., (s.a.)). This is how iconography connects the images of a pillar and ladder. The reason for placing pillar-like churches (not necessarily with altars dedicated to the Holy Stylites)



Fig. 1. Ladder. Icon (Akafistnik..., (s.a.)).

in monasteries becomes clear. This emphasized the idea of the ascetic feat of the monks.

The scope of this article does not make it possible to mention all reasons for the dedication of each church “under the bells”. The reader may consult the rich literature on this issue, including the lives of saints, patristic treatises, etc., and we will provide only a general summary. The idea of spiritual perfection and participation in the supreme power was reflected in dedications of churches “under the bells” to miraculous events, such as the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the Ascension of the Lord, and the Transfiguration of the Lord, as well as to saints who acquired the true Christian faith, believed in a miracle, or were engaged in missionary work, dissemination, and interpretation of the basic tenets of Christianity (for example, altars dedicated to Sts. Barlaam and Joasaph, St. Zechariah and Elisabeth, the Holy Apostle John the Theologian, the Three Holy Hierarchs (Sts. Basil of Cappadocia, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom), the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, St. Prince Vladimir Equal-to-the-Apostles, the Holy Martyr Hermolaus of Nicomedia, St. Alexis, the Metropolitan of Moscow, St. Sergius of Radonezh, or St. Innocent, Bishop of Irkutsk).

The motif of a pillar was typical not only for churches “under the bells”, but also for tiered and hipped churches. Moreover, according to the conclusion of M.E. Vengerova, who analyzed churches of the 10th–15th centuries, their architecture embodied the image of a pillar—intangible, formed by the internal space of the building, extending from the ground to the central point of the vault of the central dome, and ending with “representation of God, round in plan view, like the image of heaven descending to earth, that very ‘presence of God on earth’ about which the Holy Fathers spoke” (2018: 29–30). The theological marking of churches began with the “life-giving pillar” (Ibid.: 23, 36–37). The pillar is somehow represented in the architecture of churches of various types, which indicates its importance from an ideological perspective.

The Cross as a life-giving, victorious pillar

What are the semantics behind the concept of the “life-giving pillar”? To answer this question, we need to recall that in Byzantium, during the Iconoclasm, the Cross, symbolically representing the resurrected Christ, was depicted in the central dome of churches. After the victory of icon veneration, the Cross was replaced by the image of the Pantocrator (Vereshchagina, 2019: 441). This tradition compels us to turn to the concept of the Life-Giving Cross—the main Christian relic whose visualization suggests a pillar-like structure. According to Christian doctrine, the Cross upon which the Savior was crucified, is the Life-giving True Cross (Ibid.: 438). Churches of the Crucifixion and Exaltation of the Cross were dedicated to it. The image of the Cross was also reflected in the dedication of the church of the Prudent Thief Rakh who, according to the legend, was crucified at the right hand of Christ and believed in Him before death.

In the Byzantine tradition, veneration of the Cross was associated with an important event in Christian history—the miraculous vision of the Emperor Constantine the Great before the upcoming battle. The sign of the Cross with the inscription “By this sign you will conquer!” appeared to him, as well as Christ who commanded him to make a banner similar to that seen in heaven and to use it for protection against attacks from the enemies (Ibid.). As a result, a military banner was made in the form of four-pointed cross, which became the state banner of Byzantium. In addition, according to his Life, Constantine ordered that three crosses should be made after the image that appeared to him in a dream, that the inscription “Jesus Christ the Victor” should be placed on each of them, and that they should be set on a marble pillar (!) (Ibid.). After Empress Helena acquired the Wood of the True Cross, a part of that relic was sent

to Constantinople to Constantine, who ordered to make several true crosses. One of them contained a particle of the life-giving wood and became a reliquary. It is known as the “cross of Constantine”, which was kept in the Imperial Palace and was used in court ceremonies (Shalina, 2005: 133–163). It was also called the “victorious cross”, since it was associated with the idea of victories of the Emperors, primarily over the infidels, and was considered a symbol of the triumph of rulers (Grabar, 2000: 55–67).

Churches “under the bells”, possibly owing to the symbolism of the Cross as a bringer of victory, received dedications of altars to miracle-working icons, which granted defeat of the enemy, to miraculous events, which ensured victory or were associated with military glory, and to holy warriors, who were considered in Russian culture to be protectors and victorious patrons of the military. Examples include altars dedicated to the Tikhvin Icon of the Mother of God, the Smolensk Icon of the Mother of God, the Intercession of the Mother of God, the Annunciation, the Holy Life-Giving Trinity, the Image of Christ Not Made-by-Hands, the Holy Great Martyr George the Victorious, St. Warrior Theodore Stratilates, leaders of the angelic hosts Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel, one of the Holy Youths of Ephesus Martyr Warrior Maximilian, and the Holy Martyr Warrior Victor of Damascus. In this regard, it is justified to build churches “under the bells” at military bases. Churches “under the bells” are also built at healthcare institutions, which have departmental affiliation with the Federal Security Service, Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, etc. Various and non-obvious dedications of altars of the churches should not delude us, since any church, according to the rules, is dedicated to God, and specific aspects of its consecration are related to individual issues (the wishes of those who donated to build the church, the commemorative function of a church, decisions and choice of bishops, etc.). The above-mentioned dedications, typical of churches “under the bells”, correspond not only to this type of church.

There are dedications of churches “under the bells” to Old Russian Sts. Princes Boris and Gleb, and St. Prince Vladimir, Equal to the Apostles. This reveals a connection with the Byzantine tradition—the motif of the “victorious cross” of Emperor Constantine symbolized the triumph of representatives of power. Nevertheless, there may be other possible semantic suggestions for justifying the dedications in the context of the history of Orthodoxy (Fig. 2).

Ringings of bells—the “voice of God”

The main feature of churches “under the bells”—placement of the belfry level above the central part



Fig. 2. Sts. Boris and Gleb with scenes of lives. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia. Inv. No. 28757 (Drevnerusskaya zhivopis..., 1958: Pl. 33).



Fig. 3. Church of St. Innocent in the village of Alar (Lyubimov, 1914: 217).

of the space under the dome—also requires some discussion. The ringing of bells is the voice of the church (Proshchenko, 2011: 56), without which any Orthodox church is unthinkable. It is not for nothing that in the Soviet period, closure of churches was accompanied by the mandatory removal of their bells (Kozlov, 1994; Tosin, 2009). Bells acted as heralds of Christian values, and covered a wide surrounding area with their ringing. It was believed that an imaginary, semantically rich staircase-pillar led to the bell as the “voice of God”. This was embodied in the architecture of churches “under the bells”: the sound came directly from the place where the liturgy was being performed, emphasizing its significance. The image-oriented structure of churches is reminiscent of pillars as the most ancient structure for hanging bells, and everything ancient is of enduring value for religious and mythological forms of thinking.

The brief history of the appearance of bells in Rus makes it possible to identify some of the reasons for the spread of churches “under the bells” (see (Proshchenko, 2011)). In Byzantine Christianity, bells did not play

a very important role. In the Russian culture, they appeared thanks to Europeans, who became the first bell casters on Russian requests. In Old Russian chronicles, bells were first mentioned in the 11th century. In the 12th century, bells began to be cast in Rus, but this production stopped completely during the Tatar-Mongol invasion. Only in the early 15th century was bell casting revived in the northeast of the Russian State, and then in Moscow, where the “Cannon Yard”, producing cannons and bells, was organized. Churches “under the bells” appeared and became widespread in the 14th–15th centuries, usually in the areas where casting production flourished and stylitism was especially revered. Churches became conductors of essential concepts, which retained their importance in the subsequent periods also in other Russian regions.

Numerous examples reveal the symbolic importance of bells for church life. Two churches may be mentioned specifically. The dedication of the Great Chrysostom or Church of St. Maximilian in Yekaterinburg not only testifies to the veneration of St. John Chrysostom, but also indicates the “golden voice” of its bells. According

to the original plan, this church building was supposed to serve as a bell tower for a larger church, but owing to the lack of funds it was built in the 19th century as a church “under the bells” with two altars (dedicated to St. Young Maximilian and St. John Chrysostom). People call the church “Great Chrysostom” not only because of its height and volume, but also because of the loud chimes of bells, which can be heard even on the distant outskirts of the city (for more details, see (Voroshilin, 1995)). The symbolism of the aforementioned church in the village of Alar is also noteworthy. Its appearance embodies the imagery associated with Christian concepts: a central dome in the form of a bell served as a symbol of the Christian message. Bells were placed under the dome, on the belfry level. This symbolism, striking in its artless straightforwardness, implied an unambiguous perception of the church by the proselyte audience as embodiment of the triumph of Orthodoxy (Fig. 3).

Conclusions

Russian Orthodox churches “under the bells” are distinguished by sophisticated semantics based on a combination of the image of bell as the “voice of God” and embodiments of the life-giving pillar—the ladder and the Cross, which reflect the ideas of spiritual perfection leading to God. Altars of churches are dedicated to the miraculous events of the Christian doctrine, which have a transformative basis (the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the Ascension of the Lord, the Transfiguration of the Lord); saints revered in Orthodoxy, who became the theorists interpreting and developing the concepts of the doctrine; and missionaries and preachers, as well as those who miraculously believed in Christ and followed the path of spiritual development. The idea of victory brought by the Cross continued the tradition of Byzantium and was embodied in the dedication of altars to miraculous events and miraculous icons associated with military glory, and to holy victorious warriors, as well as patrons of the military. The combination of Byzantine religious traditions with European practices of making and using bells, adapted to Russian culture, gave rise to typologically unique images of churches “under the bells”. The concepts materialized in the buildings were isolated from notions of everyday life, and gave new semantic coloring to the picture of the Russian world. Pillar-like buildings of churches “under the bells”, where the belfry levels are placed above the liturgical spaces, serve as acoustic and visual markers of the cultural landscape where the identity of the Orthodox world is formed. This identity is characterized by concepts of spiritual maturation and the triumph of the Christian faith.

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