

## ORTHODOXY – THE SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE OF THE DRAMA *JULY* BY IVAN VYRYPAEV

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### ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The aim of the paper is to interpret and analyse Orthodox symbols through the prism of Orthodox theology.

**Methods.** The senses of the Orthodox symbolism as proposed by the artist are not always compliant with Orthodox doctrine. Therefore, in order to fully understand the sense of Ivan Vyrypaev's drama, it is necessary to first decode the Orthodox symbols that make up the language of the work discussed. For this reason, the major Orthodox symbols occurring in *July* are listed at the very beginning of the paper. Then, they are discussed in the context of Orthodox theology as well as the artist's own words. This task contributes to the decoding of the language of Vyrypaev's work.

**Results.** According to I. Vyrypaev, the cruelty of a patient of the Smolensk madhouse is an inverted hierarchy of values, which, at the same time, serves as his path of inquiry. On the other hand, the superficial attitudes, such as good, culture, humanitarianism, liberal values or democracy are obstacles (demons) which he has to overcome in order to find himself and God. The Orthodox symbols in *July* are allegories by means of which the author wants to show the main hero's path to the truth. Furthermore, a justification for this way of thinking is one of the mottos that I. Vyrypaev included in *July*.

**Conclusions.** In the drama *July*, I. Vyrypaev utilised the following sacral symbols: the theological significance of the Church in the Orthodox faith, the idea of communality, the concept of Orthodox humility, as well as the idea of deification and martyrdom. The threads of the Orthodox symbolism used by I. Vyrypaev are superficial and should not be interpreted literally. The author consciously inverts the hierarchy of the Orthodox symbols in his work in order to show the bewilderment and corruption of the modern society. In the drama *July*, I. Vyrypaev is more focused on being inspired by the Orthodox culture than on closely reflecting its senses. The symbolism of the altar and the ideas of martyrdom as applied in *July* are similar to the Christian symbols in the Roman Catholic approach.

**Key words:** Orthodoxy, theatre, Vyrypaev, symbols, demons, Poland, Russia

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

The reason for writing this paper was the author of *July* (Vyrypaev, 2006) himself as he included numerous mottos referring to Orthodox culture. Hence questions arise as to what extent are the interpretations assumed by Ivan Vyrypaev rooted in Orthodox theology? Is this the kind of symbolism only typical for Orthodox culture or can you find in it elements of Roman Catholic Christianity? The object of research is the drama *July* by I. Vyrypaev. It should be emphasised that I. Vyrypaev admitted in an interview that *July* contains numerous threads relating to Father Pavel Florensky's Orthodox philosophy.

"(...) Here I follow the philosophy of Florensky, an Orthodox philosopher, the author of the absolutely beautiful book *Iconostasis*. He wrote that man is surrounded by demons that prevent him from penetrating into that which is most true. What do they offer him? Outer beauty and the conviction that he is following God; that he is good and cultured, deals with humanitarianism, liberal values and democracy, and talks about God. Except that he fails to penetrate into the truth. He is merely self-complacent. However, the sinful soul cannot deal with it because it is wholly submerged in shit. There is no time for it to walk into the beauty and peace that those demons experience. And when it humbles itself and searches, it finally finds God" (Vyrypaev, 2009, p. 20).

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In *July*, I. Vyrypaev used the following sacral symbols: the theological significance of the Church in the Orthodox faith, the idea of communality, the concept of Orthodox humility as well as the idea of deification and martyrdom. Discussion of the above mentioned Orthodox symbols should commence with the scene which describes the behaviour of the main hero, a serial murderer, in a church: "(...) I walk to the altar; here, everything is wide open, too; I walk to the altar, take a shortcut through the Beautiful Gates; so it is. And I behold a table, and a cloth on it, as if of gold, but this is not gold, must be a counterfeit; then I hear a woman's voice somewhere behind me, I hear her shout something at me, something to the effect that I must not be here; and she shouts with some sort of terror" (Vyrypaev, 2009, p. 53).

This way the man desecrates the holy place for the altar in the Orthodox Church symbolises Christ. According to Orthodox theology, the tabernacle, containing the Body and Blood of Christ, symbolises Christ's tomb, broken by the power of the Resurrection (Evdokimov, 1986). For this reason, it is only priests that can approach the altar and touch it. Prior to that, however, they have to bow before this living figure of Christ. The main hero is not a priest or a clergyman. His behaviour is not permissible because he fails to show due respect. He does not understand the essence of this sacred place. The very matter of the altar in which there is the tabernacle is transformed by the laying of sacred relics or indestructible bones of martyrs in its interior, which is a

faithful rendering of Revelation 6v9: "The angel sees under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held" (Evdokimov, 1986, p. 273). I. Vyrypaev utilised the symbol of the altar in the Orthodox Church for the purpose of demonstrating, through the main hero's behaviour, full of ignorance, the bewilderment of the modern Russian society. Today most Russians describe themselves as non-practising believers, which is also mentioned by I. Vyrypaev. His generation was born and grew up in the Soviet reality, in which Orthodoxy only had a marginal role and a majority of the society were atheists. That same generation started adult life after the systemic transformations, in the period of the revival of the Orthodox Church. Because of the historic events, I. Vyrypaev's generation is searching for its religious identity today. In effect, they consider themselves Orthodox. They lack, however, an elementary knowledge, refinement and religious practice. Calling oneself an Orthodox person without any religious practice is a manifestation of superficiality and repetition that I. Vyrypaev mentioned in an interview (Vyrypaev, 2009). Most Russians who declare to be Orthodox believers would not see anything iconoclastic in the main hero's behaviour because they themselves have no idea how to behave in a church. Furthermore, the altar symbol could be considered as universal for both Orthodoxy and Christianity in the Roman Catholic because, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the altar in Christianity is the symbol of Christ, too. Therefore, this symbol should be easy to interpret and comprehensible to the Polish reader and spectator of I. Vyrypaev's theatrical output.

The consequences of this scene in the drama are the events that relate to the Orthodox idea of humility and communality. A clergyman stands in defence of the sacred, and the main hero starts beating him at the altar.

"As he grabbed me by the hem, at once I broke his arm, almost into two pieces. And then even himself I stitched with my legs like a padded vest with crude fibre, and I put that whole rug made of the pope - *July* in front of the door to their paradise altar" (Vyrypaev, 2009, p. 53).

To the amazement of the oppressor, the woman witnessing the whole incident does not call for help but begins to pray fervently. When the clergyman regains strength, the woman leaves with humility. And the priest himself begins to talk to the main hero as with a best friend. With attention and engagement, he is listening to the story of his life. The woman's behaviour is closely related to the Orthodox notion of community. Orthodox anthropology proclaims that man is a communal being (Paprocki, 2004). One is connected with the community through their human nature and also through the Church, the mystical body of Christ, and through grace, which at the same time involves God (Paprocki, 2004). The path to God, to the Divine Archetype, leads through the darkness referred to by I. Vyrypaev (Paprocki, 2004). Therefore, repentance means putting total trust in Christ because Christ renewed our nature through the cross and united us with himself and with other people (Paprocki, 2004). According to the author of *July*, with her fervent prayer, the woman overcomes

the demon and thereby helps the clergyman and the murderer pass through the darkness, while she pleads for and obtains repentance for the latter. One more time I. Vyrypaev used an Orthodox symbol in order to show the main hero's inverted hierarchy of values.

When discussing *July*, it is also worthwhile to pay attention to the priest Mikhail's murder, in the description of which I. Vyrypaev utilised the Orthodox idea of deification and martyrdom. A sixty-two-year-old cannibal decides to kill the clergyman for the love of him so that Father Mikhail might end up in paradise as a martyr. The oppressor's affection flowed from Father Mikhail's openness, kindness, help, understanding and empathy towards him. The priest was one of the few people who regarded the serial murderer with kindness. Therefore, he decided to bestow upon the clergyman the highest value, i.e. paradise and sanctity.

"(...) For three months, each night, I sat up and pondered and pondered, when suddenly, I pondered my way to what I wanted, I woke Father Mikhail and asked him a question that I had finely prepared 'Mikhail Valerievich [by that moment I had already elevated him in my sight that I only addressed him by his first name and patronymic even though Father Mikhail was thirty-four years younger than me], Mikhail Valerievich, please, tell me, does a priest, innocently murdered but as a martyr go to paradise or to hell?' He answered, to paradise, but he stipulated that it is so only if that priest was genuinely innocent and was killed without any guilt on his part. I was fully satisfied with that answer, and the books which I forced myself to read at the behest of Father Mikhail, all those books backed me up, too. I love you, pope – July. You are holy and you deserve paradise like hardly anyone. And to make sure everything was done decently, I took another four hours or so and cut him into tiny pieces, clearly adding to his unimaginable torments but I did that in such manner that Father Mikhail should not lose consciousness but suffer in his right and sound mind" (Vyrypaev, 2009, p. 63).

One of the paths to holiness in both Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christianity is by martyrdom. The veneration of saints is related to the Orthodox teaching of deification as the purpose of the Christian life (Charkiewicz, 2010). Holiness is a gift that God bestows upon man through the Holy Spirit. It is impossible for man to receive this gift without working together with God: without one's spiritual effort, his or her active faith and active love to accomplish God's likeness in himself or herself. One's deification means oneness with God through the Holy Spirit (Charkiewicz, 2010). This oneness is achieved not so much by following Christ but rather by genuine godliness and absolute obedience to God. The veneration of saints grew out of the veneration of martyrs and became over time an inseparable element of the ecclesiastic being (Charkiewicz, 2010). Orthodox believers treat saints as their guardians in heaven; therefore, the path to holiness and deification is the main objective in life for believers. The main hero's way of thinking, as presented by I. Vyrypaev, is bound to be erroneous and false because he alone cannot ensure holiness and paradise for Father Mikhail. As it has been mentioned above, holiness is a gift of God, offered through the Holy Spirit, not a serial murderer. According

to I. Vyrypaev, the cannibal's conviction is only his own erroneous, external conviction which prevents him from perceiving the truth that follows from the grace of God. Furthermore, for a death to be considered as martyrdom, there must occur some essential elements. Firstly, there must be an oppressor who acts as the cause that inflicts death due to the hatred against faith (Chrapkowski, 2003). The death itself may be inflicted by the perpetrator personally or by someone else who was commissioned to do this (Chrapkowski, 2003). Secondly, martyrdom is deemed proof of one's heroic love for Christ (Chrapkowski, 2003). Thirdly, another problem that appears in connection with martyrdom is the necessity to ascertain the date and circumstances of the death itself and whether death was inflicted directly or indirectly (Chrapkowski, 2003). Fourthly, the cause of the martyrdom is also essential. The cause of martyrdom is faith in Christ or another virtue related to God being the motive for which someone inflicts death (Chrapkowski, 2003). So, on the part of the martyr, we are dealing with the love of faith, while on the part of the one inflicting death, with hatred of the faith. In I. Vyrypaev's work, the oppressor is the main hero, who acts as the cause of inflicting death because of his affection for the victim and his desire to make sure he gets to paradise. Therefore, there can be no question of hatred of faith on the part of the main hero. Considering the criterion of heroic love as one of the elements of Father Mikhail's martyrdom, it should be remarked that there are too few threads in *July* depicting the clergyman himself and his life for a discussion on this topic. While we are able to discern the circumstances of the death itself, we might have a problem trying to come up with a definite date. We can only place this incident during the action of the play. With regard to the cause of the martyrdom in the context of Valerievich, we might suggest a series of unfortunate circumstances. Based on the information provided in *July*, it is difficult to make a judgement concerning Father Mikhail's love of faith and even more so concerning the main hero's hatred for the truths of faith. We can only presume that the clergyman was a devout believer. Such a conclusion can be drawn when observing the clergyman's attitude towards the main hero.

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, I. Vyrypaev made reference in the drama *July* to the following Orthodox symbols: the theological significance of the altar in the Orthodox Church, the idea of communality and the concept of Orthodox humility, as well as the idea of deification and martyrdom. In the thread on the importance of the sanctuary in the Orthodox faith, he makes reference to the essence of the altar in the Church as a symbol of Christ. At the same time, he draws attention to the Orthodox rituals and the clearly defined code of conduct in the sacred place. The idea of communality and the concept of Orthodox humility are presented by I. Vyrypaev in the scene of the fight between the main hero and Father Mikhail. And the essence of Orthodox martyrdom, i.e. deification,

in the murder of Father Mikhail. The threads of Orthodox symbolism used by I. Vyrypaev are superficial and should not be interpreted literally. The author consciously inverts the hierarchy of Orthodox symbols in his work in order to show the confusion and corruption of modern society. In the drama *July*, I. Vyrypaev is more focused on being inspired by the Orthodox culture than on closely reflecting its senses. Furthermore, the symbolism of the altar and the ideas of martyrdom as applied in *July* are similar to the Christian symbols in the Roman Catholic approach, which is marked in the text.

### RESEARCH PROSPECTS

A practical application of this paper might be for popular academic research aimed at answering the question of how I. Vyrypaev's symbolic language of theatre is decoded by the Russian and Polish, and the Western audiences. Such research might be conducted in consultation with the theatres that stage I. Vyrypaev's performances.

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