

Andrew Simsky

**THE ESOTERIC CHRISTIANITY AND ARTISTIC LANGUAGE  
OF ALEXANDER IVANOV<sup>1</sup>**

Alexander Ivanov (1806–1858) was a Russian academic artist who spent the larger part of his career in Rome working on a large-scale canvas entitled “The appearance of the Messiah”. Before embarking on this endeavor, however, he first had to complete a smaller painting, a representation of “*Noli me tangere*” (1835), which was received with great acclaim in Saint Petersburg. During the last decade of his life he started a major project entirely of his own, namely a large set of sketches for murals which covered all the important episodes of the Gospel, together with theologically linked Old Testament stories. These sketches, which evinced a novel artistic language, are collectively referred to as the Biblical Studies. In this paper, I shall put forward an account of Ivanov’s spiritual journey, which led him to the creation of this vibrant epic, filled with light and magic.

\* \* \*

Ivanov stands out as one of the greatest Russian painters. His artistic biography has received sustained and wide attention from Russian art historians. In spite of this attention, however, in-depth analysis of his religious views, which clearly bear a great deal of importance for an artist so fully devoted to Biblical subjects, remains lacking. Most authors characterize his religiosity in a simplified manner, for example, in terms of his faith’s strength or weakness. His religious motivation has typically been either taken for granted or understated depending on the author’s own sympathies.

V.M. Zummer was the first researcher to address the question of Ivanov’s religiosity from a scientific standpoint. In particular, Zummer reconstructed Ivanov’s peculiar eschatological views tinted with millenarism. Ivanov was anticipating Parousia in the advent of a Christ-like Russian Czar assisted by a utopian community of artists, which would inspire the Monarch through historical paintings on uplifting Evangelical subjects<sup>2</sup>. Zummer also

<sup>1</sup> The text is published as submitted by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Zummer V.M. The eschatology of A. Ivanov. Notes of the research chair of European culture, Kharkhov: Kharkhov State University, 1929. P. 387–410.

highlighted how the content and the structure of Ivanov's Biblical Studies closely followed the analysis of David Strauss, a German theologian, whose book, "The life of Jesus critically examined", our artist had intensively studied. In spite of his success in elucidating the organizing principle at work in the Biblical Studies, Zummer found himself faced with a rather challenging question: what was the source of the Studies' inspiration? Given that Strauss' criticism endeavored to unmask the Gospel as a myth, "how was the skeptical lifeless word of Strauss' book able to engender the vibrant shimmering fabric of Ivanov's compositions?"<sup>1</sup>

One possible solution to this problem would be to postulate a measure of independence of Ivanov's faith from Strauss' 'demythologization'. While Ivanov may have borrowed Strauss' structure, he kept the latter's critical theology at bay<sup>2</sup>. Such line of thought would nevertheless compel us to ascribe to Ivanov a compartmentalized mentality, a kind of 'personality split', that was far from being typical for people of his time. Moreover, Ivanov's sincere fascination with Strauss' ideas is evident. In this research, I shall attempt to unravel these apparent contradictions by exploring Ivanov's work in the broader context of contemporary Russian religious thought. I will argue that Strauss' theology not only could be naturally integrated into Ivanov's spiritual world, but that it stimulated his artistic inspiration.

Ivanov's underlying motivation in the Biblical Studies comes across as particularly enigmatic in light of the generally accepted view of the crisis of faith that he underwent shortly following the revolutionary year of 1848<sup>3</sup>. There are indications that, during this period, the artist's traditional faith crumbled and gave way to a more 'progressive' worldview. It is quite difficult to comprehend how this 'crisis of faith' (typically understood in terms of his faith's weakening) could provoke such an effusion of spontaneous burgeoning creativity in Biblical illustrations. At the same time it is also easy to wonder as to the origins of the unique artistic language of Biblical studies, for the latter stands in marked contrast against the academicism that defined the artist's earlier work. To borrow Mashkovtsev's apt turn of phrase, how was Ivanov able to transform from an "academic Salieri into a sparkling Mozart" inspired by a "winged genius of composition?"<sup>4</sup>

My contention, further developed in what follows, is that Ivanov's spiritual journey can only be properly understood in relation to the broader movement

<sup>1</sup> Zummer V.M. On the faith and the temple of Alexander Ivanov. Kiyev: Khristianskaia mysl, 1918. P. 46.

<sup>2</sup> Mashkovtsev N. Artistic journey of Alexander Ivanov // Apollon, 1916, No 6–7. P. 39; Kopirovsky A.M. The system of monumental murals of Alexander Ivanov (Biblical studies) – theology within religious studies // Vestnik RHGA, 2014, vol. 15, No 2. P. 65–73.

<sup>3</sup> Soviet art historians even talked about 'refreshing' influence of revolutionary spirit working in Ivanov. In reality, the artist bore the memory of the revolution of 1848 with horror and denounced its principles as "an end and devastation of any artistry" (Turgenev I.S. The trip to Albano and Frascati // Vek, 1861, No 15. P. 75).

<sup>4</sup> Mashkovtsev N. Op. cit. P. 16.

of a-dogmatic ‘interior Christianity’ that formed the atmosphere of Russian religiosity in the beginning of the XIX century. It was Ivanov’s evolution within this historical context that gave shape to his inspiration in the Biblical Studies. I shall also argue that the ‘crisis of faith’ provoked by the critical work of Strauss involved a renewal, rather than a loss, of Ivanov’s faith<sup>1</sup>. And I hope to show that in the novel iconicity of the Biblical studies we find an expression of this renewed faith.

#### INTERIOR CHRISTIANITY IN EARLY XIX CENTURY RUSSIA

Russian religious thought of the early XIX century was deeply influenced by Protestantism. Theology was studied in Latin, while seminary students worked with Lutheran textbooks. Of all theological disciplines, study of the Bible came to the fore, while relatively little attention was devoted to patristics or liturgics. Even the national ecclesiology bore a protestant stamp: the Church was defined as an assembly of believers with the Russian Emperor at its head. Similarly, a politicized ecumenism in the spirit of the Holy Alliance held sway as an official ideology: all the three main branches of Christendom were recognized as equal in holiness.

The style of individual religiosity in Russian high society gravitated in the direction of pietism. Future priests commonly received a copy of “The True Christianity” by Johan Arndt as a graduation gift. Arndt called for a solitary “imitation of Christ” à la Thomas à Kempis (the latter figured among Ivanov’s favorite reading material). Arndt also reproached the church authorities for their obsession with dogmatism and external cult forms while neglecting the true spiritual life at work “in the temple of one’s heart”. This, of course, is just one example of a much broader trend. Orthodoxy was commonly viewed in terms of a ritualism that was useful for little more than guiding those of the uneducated lower class into the heavenly realms via external forms and symbols. Meanwhile, the elite could directly march toward the same goal by a purely interior spiritual way of religious life. The esoteric and invisible “interior church”<sup>2</sup> was viewed as a higher step of spiritual growth compared to an ordinary, exoteric church. During the period of Double-Ministry<sup>3</sup> such “religion of the heart” almost came to form an official policy: its criticism from a standpoint of confessional Orthodoxy could even be treated as political dissent<sup>4</sup>. The creed that formed the basis of this broad movement, uniting an entire spectrum of heretics and conservatives

<sup>1</sup> A. N. Benois wrote: “The Christological research of a German scholar has shaken his previous scholastic faith... and now in place of an old timid religiosity another kind of faith has awakened in him: philosophically enlightened and truly Christian” (*Benois A.N. History of Russian fine arts in XIX century*. Moscow: Respublika, 1999. P. 171).

<sup>2</sup> *Lopukhin I.V. Some characteristics of the interior church*. Mesa, AR: Scriptoria, 2009 (orig. 1798).

<sup>3</sup> *Shubin D.H. A history of Russian Christianity*. Algona Pub., 2005, vol. 3. P. 95–98.

<sup>4</sup> *Florovsky G. The routes of Russian theology*. Moscow: Institut russkoi tsivilizatsii, 2009. P. 177.

was the well-known evangelical dictum “The Kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21).

Each aspect of Ivanov’s spiritual life can readily be recognized in this type of religiosity: his unconditional devotion to the Bible, his solitary life, his belief in having a divinely appointed destiny, his utopianism as well as his tendency to deliver didactic sermons. Pietistic traits can also be found in the character of the writer Nikolai Gogol, his bosom friend and spiritual guide<sup>1</sup>. Both felt certain to have been chosen for a special mission, namely to spread the teaching and morality of the Gospel by means of their respective arts. This high and almost prophetic calling required full dedication and self-denial, including celibacy.

Ivanov’s sense of a high calling grew even stronger following the Emperor’s visit in 1845: “As a lightning flashes from one end of the heavens to the other, so will be the coming of the Czar in the spirit of Truth. This I have experienced during his visit to my studio”<sup>2</sup>. Ivanov believed that the prophecy concerning Christ’s second coming would be brought about through an advent of a Christ-like Russian Czar who would lead both Russia and Europe to the dawning of a Christian Golden Age. As an artist he felt himself called to the evangelical mission of enlightening both society at large and the Monarch on the way to this utopian destination<sup>3</sup>.

Ivanov’s attitude toward the Church can also be understood in the light of his interior Christianity. Though his membership in the Orthodox Church was beyond discussion, in his letters and notes he makes almost no mention of church services nor sacraments and writes about the clergy with an air of superiority. Some passages of his writing make clear that he viewed Orthodox rituals as a symbolic form encapsulating (but also obscuring) the true spiritual essence of Christianity. He writes, for example, that “we, not having yet reached Christ’s thought, ... think that our continuous transgressions can be atoned by the observance of rituals that symbolically glorify Him”<sup>4</sup>. As an alternative to this ritualism, which amounts to little more than “an empty form devoid of interior force”<sup>5</sup>, he aspired to enlighten the people by creating an equivalent of the Gospel by means of the fine arts.

His commitment to the solitary spiritual life reminds not only of reclusive monks, but also reveals quite a different spirit of elitist messianism: “Before one is ripe and sure of one’s accomplishment, one should not come out to the people, who from the weakness of their own nature are ready to burden the chosen one...”<sup>6</sup> An elitist esoteric Christianity of the few was closely tied with the romantic ideal of the solitary hero. A phantom of the *Übermensch*

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. P. 331–344.

<sup>2</sup> *Zummer V.M.*. On the faith and the temple of Alexander Ivanov. P. 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Zummer V.M.*. The eschatology of A. Ivanov. P. 400.

<sup>4</sup> *Sobko N.* Ivanov. The Dictionary of Russian artists, Saint Petersburg, 1895. P. 263–264.

<sup>5</sup> *Zummer V.M.* On the faith and the temple of Alexander Ivanov. P. 8.

<sup>6</sup> *Sobko N.* Op. cit. P. 69.



already wandering about in the air of European intellectual life could sometimes pay a visit to the lonely studio of the hermit-artist.

This, in sum, was the spiritual landscape where Ivanov's spiritual journey took shape and where he worked out his ideas with regard to the link between faith and art. In what follows, I would like to subdivide his spiritual evolution into three steps, the temporal boundaries of which I would rather leave vaguely defined. The first step roughly corresponds to his work on "*Noli me tangere*"; the second, to the main period of his work on the "The Appearance of the Messiah"; and the third, to the period of his growing disappointment in his *magnum opus* and of the new inspiration he found in the Biblical Studies.

Alexander Ivanov

The appearance  
of the Messiah,

1833–1857

Oil on canvas

The State Tretyakov  
Gallery, Moscow

### Step 1. The search of 'warm faith'

Ivanov first came to formulate his understanding of the relationship between art and Christian faith in his encounter with Italian Quattrocento art, where "artists expressed their feelings with warm faith."<sup>1</sup> 'Warm faith', as understood here, is sincere, organic, heartfelt. It is not a mystical experience, but rather a lived organic union of reason, emotion and action, involving the human being as a whole. Warm faith is a-dogmatic and, in accordance with the ecumenical spirit of the time, helped to inspire both Catholic as well as Orthodox artists.

<sup>1</sup> From a letter to his sponsors of 1837 (Ibid. P. 45).

In Ivanov's conception of 'warm faith' one easily discerns the influence of H. Ch. Overbeck, who "does not believe that, without complete dedication to religion and the highest degree of piety of an artist himself, it would be possible to succeed in such subjects."<sup>1</sup> One can also recognize the influence of Shellingian philosophy by way of Ivanov's friend Nikolai Rozhalin, who succeeded in convincing the young artist that the true source of art lies in one's heart and soul<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, the romantic call for free creativity proved in the end to cause a certain degree of anxiety for Ivanov – one might even say a special kind of slavery. When approaching religious subjects, he felt himself compelled to evoke 'warm faith', without which he had no right even to begin working. Hence, 'warm faith' ended up taking on the role of a kind of instrument similar to paints and brushes (without which the work would be impossible to carry out). It became an inalienable attachment to artistry as Ivanov's only fully organic and encompassing passion.

In the concept of 'warm faith' one can also feel a sense of alarm. When 'warm faith' passes from a simple and childlike reality that naturally shapes one's spiritual life to something external, such as an artistic ideal, or a theological concept, it clearly falls short of the authenticity and spiritual fervency it is meant to denote. Indeed, it is quite likely that the evocation of 'warm faith' in accordance with pietistic forms of spirituality contributed to the development of the anxiety – and even paranoia – that marked the final decade of Ivanov's life<sup>3</sup>.

## Step 2. Rationalist theology: the Bible as a historical record

The search of 'warm faith' stimulated Ivanov to devote serious study to Biblical material. In "The Appearance of the Messiah", for instance, his work strives for a thoroughgoing artistic authenticity that is true to every detail in clothing and historical paraphernalia. Fascinated with Biblical archeology, he approached the Bible as a historian. The question, "How did this really happen?", which initially referred only to the subject matter of his work, inevitably would end up applying to the Biblical text as a whole, stimulating critical analysis and a questioning of its historicity.

The rationalist theological school, which was dominant at that time (for instance, in the work of Eichhorn and Paulus) viewed the Biblical narrative in terms of documentary evidence. The miracles were reasoned out as rare but natural events, and interpretation was both artificial and remote from the meaning of the text<sup>4</sup>. Even while the authenticity of the Bible was

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. P. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Bernstein B.A. On the formation of the aesthetic views of Alexander Ivanov // *Iskusstvo*, 1957, No 2. P. 39–43; Polikarpov V.P. Philosophical foundation of A. Ivanov's artistry // *Sovetskoe isskustvoznaniye* 74, 1975. P. 177–199.

<sup>3</sup> To offer an example, Ivanov came to believe that his fellow artists were trying to poison him, with the help of waiters at restaurants that he frequented, out of rivalry.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Eichhorn interpreted the tree of knowledge of good and evil as having been merely a poisonous plant (*Strauss D.F. The life of Jesus critically examined*. 4th edition, London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1902. P. 66).

preserved, its heart and soul (i.e. a dialogue with God) was lost. The divine, the miraculous and the poetic were methodically scrubbed from the Bible. It is this arid theology that influenced the marked realism and the air of 'dryness' felt in "The Appearance of the Messiah".

Around the midpoint of this period, Ivanov interrupted the work on his *magnum opus* and transitioned to a study for a mural altarpiece "The Resurrection". Some scholars viewed this as a distraction brought about under the influence of his slavophile friends.<sup>1</sup> This 'distraction' nevertheless foreshadowed some of the traits of the next step in his course<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, while working on this sketch, Ivanov gave fresh consideration to the link between art and faith. One finds him jotting down complex trains of thought that even remind one of Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite: "Man senses Divinity – infinite, omnipotent and incorporeal. But he cannot represent Him otherwise than by ascribing to Him man's own lofty qualities, thus forming ideals for himself."<sup>3</sup> Quite in accordance with his interior Christianity, his art began to address the very "spirit of Grace and Truth" lifting the viewer far above hopeless and tiresome theological disputes about God. His "Resurrection" evoked the core of the Heavenly Teaching leaving to Earth below "the disputes of the defenders of bodily resurrection with the proponents of the spiritual."<sup>4</sup> In this period, Ivanov came to discover that the visual arts were better able to capture the essence of spiritual reality than literature. This new turn of his thinking calls to mind the common esoteric idea regarding the primacy of visual symbolism over explicit teaching. It was this new understanding of religious art that allowed Ivanov to come up with a novel form of iconicity in the Biblical Studies.



Alexander Ivanov  
The Resurrection  
study; a sketch  
for a mural altarpiece  
for the cathedral  
of Christ the Savior  
in Moscow, 1845  
Gouache pencil  
on paper. The State  
Tretyakov Gallery,  
Moscow

### Step 3. Mythological theology and the inspiration of Biblical Studies

Ivanov repeatedly stated that the overriding purpose of "The Appearance of the Messiah" was to convey the message of the entire Gospel. Indeed, the appearance of Christ amidst the people and their response to His coming stand as the central meaning of the Gospel. But Ivanov's huge canvas did not live up to his expectations. In attempting to convey the grandeur of this single episode, the entirety of the divine drama was lost. While striving for realism in painting's details, Ivanov enhanced the import of this one episode, but his broader goal remained out of reach. This quandary made something very clear to Ivanov: to create a visual equivalent of the Gospel required that all the major episodes of the Gospel be represented, forming

<sup>1</sup> Bernstein B.A. Ivanov and slavophiles // *Iskusstvo*, 1959, No 3. P. 58–66.

<sup>2</sup> Zimmer pointed at stylistic links between the "Resurrection" and the Biblical studies (Zimmer V.M. The problems of the artistic style of A. Ivanov: the style of Biblical Studies // Transactions of the Azeri State University. Social sciences, vols. 2–3, Baku, 1925. P. 84–103).

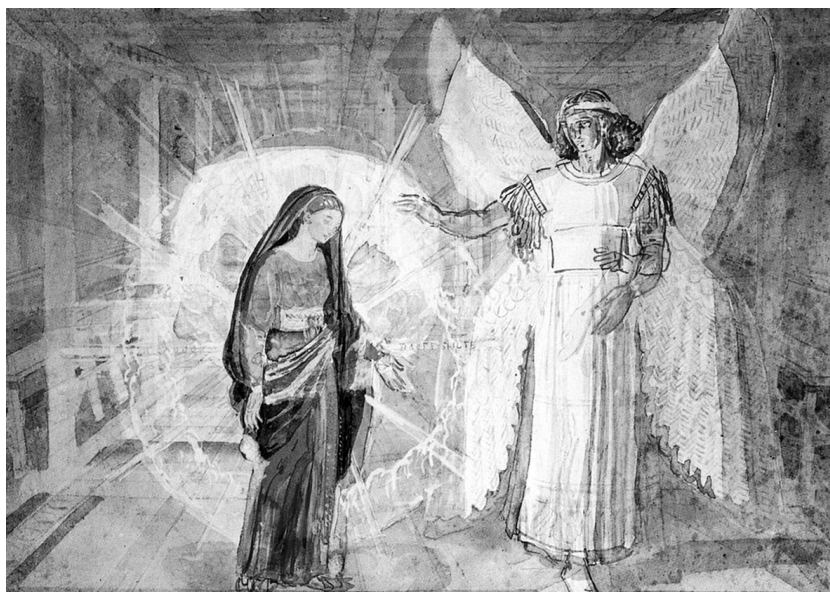
<sup>3</sup> From "Thoughts while reading the Bible" (Zimmer V.M. The eschatology of A. Ivanov. P. 397).

<sup>4</sup> Zimmer V.M. The problems of the artistic style of A. Ivanov. P. 89.

a new kind of iconostasis. The motivation behind the Biblical studies thus followed closely his earlier endeavors. What was innovative in the case of the Biblical studies was their atmosphere inspired by Ivanov's study of the book, "The life of Jesus critically examined". How was the skeptical and 'lifeless' message of Strauss, which clearly aimed to undermine both 'warm faith' and the veracity of the Bible, able to stimulate such an effusion of high-spirited creativity? Let us try to unravel this paradox.

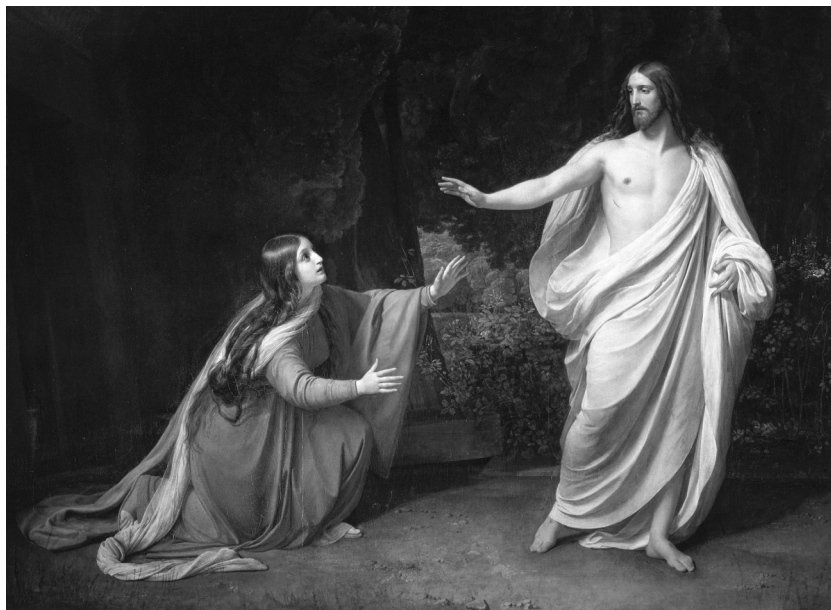
Strauss wrote his book for fellow theologians. His polemic was thus not directed against the naïve faith of ordinary people, but rather against the deistic approach of the rationalist school in theology, which had already stripped the Bible of most of its religious content. Strauss had wanted to put a stop to this perverse interpretation of the Bible and see it for what it was, namely, a corpus of ancient sacred texts containing the living tradition contemporary to its authors. His goal was thus not to suppress the faith but rather to enliven religious feelings by unveiling the original purpose of the text and by restoring a clearer perception of the Bible in its own light.<sup>1</sup> Strauss understood religion as a teaching of the Highest Truth in the form of a Myth.<sup>2</sup> Though the book in itself was dry and scholastic, his approach transformed the Bible into something of a sacred poem, opening the door onto the vivid and colorful reality of a myth that stood independently of a rational understanding of the world. This door would open for those ready to find a place for this reality in their hearts and imagination. The experience of interior Christianity, enhanced by a habit of artistic visual thinking was an ideal stepping stone on Ivanov's path into a new world of Biblical imagination.

Alexander Ivanov  
Biblical studies:  
the Annunciation  
1850s. Watercolor,  
pencil on paper.  
The State Tretyakov  
Gallery, Moscow



<sup>1</sup> Strauss D.F. Op. cit. P. 56, 58.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. P. 80.

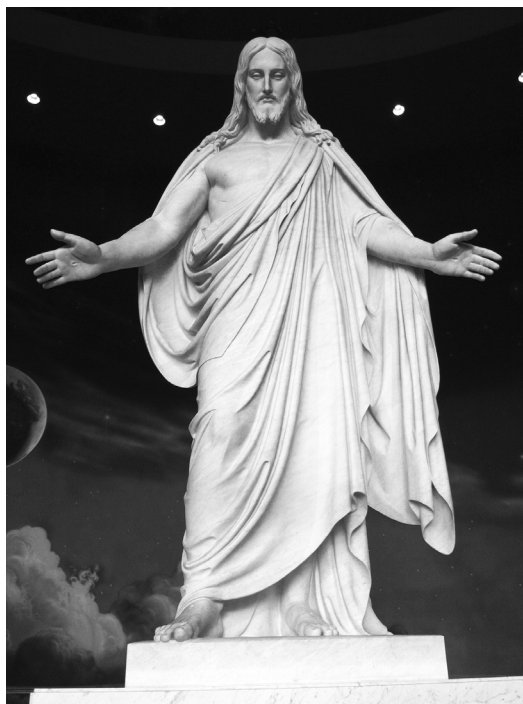


Ivanov's biographers all draw attention to his proclivity for daydreaming, utopian aspirations and living in a 'parallel reality'. Now these aspects of his character were strengthened by his religious feeling and worked together for the benefit of his art. His imagination was set free. Strauss helped Ivanov to see that, "in the beginning, there was a vision", and that the text of the Bible itself is little more than a second-hand verbal description of this vision. This fundamental, original vision has now become his model: his new iconography captured the imagery of the Biblical Myth in all its vibrant materiality, prior to its conversion into a verbal equivalent. Rather than illustrating the descriptions of miracles and visions found in the Bible, his work re-presented these events in all their original vitality and exuberance. "The myth as life and life as myth, interrelated by every element and interpenetrating every part and particle, merged into an indissoluble whole."<sup>1</sup>

Once coming to see the Bible as Myth, Ivanov, it seems, came to love it more than ever. Whereas before it had been for him only a historical record, it now metamorphosed into a veritable poem. Instead of it being a stock of knowledge, Ivanov came to see it as a treasure chest of rich religious imagery. If Strauss' logic had impressed the spatial structure of a temple onto the Bible's linear, narrative form, Ivanov covered the walls of this temple with his murals. Though a dream of 'warm faith' never materialized for Ivanov, it didn't simply evaporate either – rather, it transformed, under the influence of Strauss, into a free-flying faith-dream.

Alexander Ivanov  
Noli me tangere, 1835  
Oil on canvas  
The State Russian  
museum,  
St. Petersburg

<sup>1</sup> Stepanova S.S. Russian painting in the time of Karl Bryullov and Alexander Ivanov. Saint Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 2011. P. 226.



A copy of Bertel Thorvaldsen Christus stands in the Visitors' Center of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Salt Lake City. 1838

A Shellingian ideal of heartfelt artistic creativity thus finally found fulfillment, and Ivanov discovered a way to picture the True Faith, the faith of apostles and prophets.

\* \* \*

Studying Ivanov's art in the context of contemporary Russian religiosity helps not only to better understand the general outline of his artistic biography but also to bring to light some interesting points. Here, in closing, I would like to consider two examples.

#### THE COLD JESUS OF THORVALDSEN-IVANOV

An artist works, first and foremost, for his contemporaries. While the imagery of sacred art leaves behind for future generations the ungrateful task of dry iconological study, this same art can easily and naturally resonate in the minds of the faithful of its time. The figure of Jesus in Ivanov's *Noli me tangere* conforms to this general truth of religious aesthetics. The Jesus portrayed in this work was received with admiration by the Russian public at the time. According to the unanimous opinion of newspapers, *Noli me tangere* offered "the most satisfying representation of the One in whom we, Christians, believe – the God-Man."<sup>1</sup> For later art historians, since the end of the XIX cen-

<sup>1</sup> Novitsky A. Op. cit. P. 83.

tury, this enthusiasm looked out of place, and the Jesus of *Noli me tangere* seemed not only ordinary but cold. For some, he even seemed to resemble a stoic Roman tribune rejecting the love of a woman for the sake of his civic duty.<sup>1</sup>

Ivanov's primary source of inspiration, in this case, was the famed sculpture of Jesus by Thorvaldsen, commonly referred to as *Christus*. The story of *Christus* helps to understand the stark contrast between the two different kinds of impressions that Ivanov's rendering of Jesus made on people. Here, in short, is the story. By the end of the XIX century, *Christus* was recognized as "the most perfect of all known images of Jesus". It was not only widely copied but was even taken up as an official emblem of the Mormon Church (Latter Day Saints), which can still be seen in the Visitors' Center in Salt Lake City. In this copy, Jesus stands against the backdrop of the starry sky with an air of quiet force and 'cosmism'. We see here a confident Ruler of the World on His universal mission.

Thorvaldsen's masterpiece owes its popularity not only to its classicism but also to its romantic aspect. It shows an imposing figure of a solitary hero loaded with a superhuman burden. In the beginning of the XIX century, the romantic celebration of force, nobility of heart and heroic solitude was common both in Russia and in Western Europe. The advent of the *Übermensch* was dawning in the poems of Pushkin and Lermontov, as well



The right hand  
of St. John the Baptist  
pointing at Jesus  
in "The appearance  
of the Messiah"

<sup>1</sup> Alpatov, M.V. Alexander Andreyevich Ivanov. His life and works. Moscow: Isskusstvo, 1956, vol. 1. P. 164.

as in the novels of Hugo and Stendhal. This same trend found expression in Thorvaldsen's sculpture as well as in *Noli me tangere*, even though the figure of the *Übermensch* had not yet emerged in the literary world. The historical development of the Russian spirituality followed, however, another route. Jesus's portrayal in Russian art and culture came to be much more accessible and human in appearance: sincere, meek and gentle. The Jesus of Ivanov's *Noli me tangere* – a veritable 'cosmic' action-hero – was no longer a figure that resonated in Russian hearts.

#### THE POINTING RIGHT HAND OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Next allow me to move on to a second brief example. Ivanov's interior Christianity went hand in hand with his serious interest in traditional icon-painting, from which he strove to draw a spiritual message. In particular, he was interested in the representation of relics, not surprising given the importance these bear in the symbolic language of Christian icons. His rendering, in *Noli me tangere*, of the Jesus' burial cloth, the famed Shroud, is particularly impressive.

Now, I would argue that the pointing right hand of John the Baptist, situated in the center of "The Appearance of the Messiah" could itself be a reference to the relic of the right hand of John the Baptist, the palladium of the Russian Empire, which had been acquired during the reign of Emperor Paul. Indeed, the configuration of the hand with its two folded and, hence, invisible, fingers resembles the relic, in which two fingers are missing<sup>1</sup>. If you try to put your fingers into the configuration shown on the left side of figure, you will notice just how difficult this is, for it is not their natural position.

If my hypothesis is correct, the right hand of John the Baptist imbued Ivanov's *magnum opus* with an additional, purely Russian dimension. While the Biblical John was pointing to the approaching Messiah, his actual right hand, enshrined in the Palatine Imperial church in Saint Petersburg, was pointing to the Czar, who, in Ivanov's utopian dreams, was to become a new Messiah and lead the Russians on their predestined lofty calling. It is likely that "The Appearance of the Messiah" formed part of an argument in Ivanov's ongoing imaginary dialogue with the Monarch which started at their meeting in 1845. Did Ivanov already imagine himself playing an important role in this theocratic utopia? If the Monarch approved of his work, so Ivanov, with full rights of an artist-mentor, was pointing with the right hand of John the Baptist at the One whom the Czar was supposed to follow in order to lead his people on their great mission.

<sup>1</sup> A photo of this relic that was certainly known to Ivanov can be found in my paper "The work of Alexander Ivanov's soul" (URL: [https://lib.rmvoz.ru/bigzal/spiritual\\_Alexander\\_Ivanov](https://lib.rmvoz.ru/bigzal/spiritual_Alexander_Ivanov))