The Byzantine Church as a multimedia installation
Alexei Lidov's interview to the 'Iskusstvo' (Art) journal, 2016/2

Alexei Lidov: 'When I'd say to colleagues that a Byzantine church was set up along the lines of a multimedia installation, they'd express bewilderment and indignation.'

You've invented a science of 'hierotopy', which studies the creation of sacred space. Why was a distinct discipline necessary?

The fact is that modern European academia has lost an entire field of creative activity which is no less important than literary, musical or artistic creativity. We know, for example, that a child will naturally start to draw. Later, if they display talent, they will enter art school, then a higher education institute – in other words, a tradition has developed which makes visual art a legitimate part of culture. There is no analogous tradition with regard to sacred spaces, however. Nevertheless, a child begins to create sacred spaces, as an elementary form of communication with another reality, at the same age as he or she begins to draw. And later in life, even if we are convinced atheists, we sacralise the environment we live in with photographs of our deceased parents, or other objects that evoke our memory of another reality. In the majority of cases this creativity is unconscious, however it is one the foundational principles of a person's spiritual life. Historians are aware that, in all religious traditions, the sacred environment people create in order to communicate with God is a most important focal point, bringing together a world of other media – architecture, and music, and scents. Its main aim is to make a space for communicating with a higher world. This environment is a foundational element of a person's spiritual life. However, positivist science considers anything intangible unworthy of academic scrutiny. If 'space' per se is a problematic topic, then 'the sacred' is perceived as even more beyond the pale of scientific knowledge. A distinct discipline – 'hierotopy' – dedicated to revealing the memory of this tradition, and acknowledging its place in the contemporary arts, was therefore a necessary development. By the way, I think that the creation of sacred space is one of the most interesting and potentially fruitful forms of contemporary art.

But turning to historical practices, we should acknowledge that art cannot be reduced simply to the preparation of material objects. This may seem obvious, but if you think about it, we are convinced that the history of art boils down to the study of artefacts and the artists who laboured on them. Despite the fact that, within any religious tradition, all these objects were created specifically as part of a sacred space. By the same token, we fail to take into account the most important figure – the artist responsible for the overall concept of such a space.

Developments in contemporary art, such as immaterial compositions or the idea of the total installation, seem to have significantly influenced your approach to the study of Byzantium. Is it true that contemporary culture itself suggests new ways of analysing classical subjects?

We live in an era when virtual reality is renewing interest in space. At the end of the nineteenth century the methodology of art historians was, one way or another, determined by the technology of photography – in other words, by the technology of the flat picture, moreover, at that point, primarily still in black and white. The work of all great art historians of that period may be summed up by the fact that they compared black and white pictures. I was told, for example, that for a long period the Ganymede Hall in the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome was divided by a chalk line on the floor, with the greatest expert in Christian and Byzantine architecture Richard Krautheimer working in one half, and in the other, Rudolf Vittkower, an expert on Baroque. The floor was covered in black and white photographs: on one side Krautheimer walked around shots of the early Christian architecture of Rome, and on the other Vittkower strolled around photographs of Baroque churches. This is a really clear example of a technology which shapes consciousness. This is the paradigm of the flat picture in action: in order to start analysing a phenomenon, one must first photograph it. Only then can the methodology which has been taught in the faculty of art history for many decades be applied. I, for example, wasn't taught to work with space at all. Flat pictures are boring for a child of today, playing with gadgets. He or she needs space, even if it is virtual. I began more traditionally, studying

the role of the miracle-working icons and relics in the history of Byzantine culture. We were the first explorers of this topic in the field of Eastern Christian studies. The main lesson I learned from this work was that the fundamental significance of the miraculous icon rests in its shaping of the spatial environment around itself. And this environment was being studied by no-one! They were examining the boards, the silver caskets, everything but the sacred space engendered by the icon. In other words, I discovered an area for research for which there was, as yet, no critical apparatus. In time I developed the concept of the 'spatial icon' – this is a vital form of hierotopical imagery, which is realised in space and cannot be reduced to an object. It has the main characteristic of an icon – to be an image-mediator, in other words an image which unites the earthly and heavenly realms. Many people are as yet unaware that the icon is not a type of religious art, and not a subsection of religious pictures. A religious picture illustrates and instructs, embodies some ideologeme or other. An icon is an entirely different sort of image. Its key function is to mediate. This difference is crucial for Byzantine monuments: the image does not open out within the picture plane, but comes out into the space before it and is realised between the beholder and the depiction. This is an entirely different type of communication. The simplest example of this sort of communication is an Orthodox church. In its entirety it should be understood as a spatial icon. It is often perceived as a formulaic selection of pictures which illustrate Biblical themes. Late Byzantine tradition, like most Western tradition, may indeed be reduced to simple narratives and illustrations. The idea of pragmatic earthliness, of tying images to text, dominated. However, in classical Byzantine tradition there was no intention to illustrate, any image included within itself a multitude of texts, and each church was its own image of the Heavenly Jerusalem, although the Heavenly Jerusalem itself was nowhere depicted.

Why was another term necessary, if our concept of the ecclesiastical environment already embraced architecture, frescos, light and everything else?

When people talk about a church, they are usually referring to the architecture alone, and sometimes also to decorative features. The question of light remained under-scrutinised for many years. Scholars knew that the light in Hagia Sophia is interesting, but they didn't recognise that light is the most important medium of expression there. Neither the architectural dimensions, nor the figurative decorations – which simply weren't there until the ninth century – but the light, by which the image of God was also created. It is no coincidence that the Emperor Justinian, who was not simply the commissioner, but also the creator of this space, invited two leading optical engineers and mathematicians to bring his conception to life. Anthemios of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus developed an amazing technological strategy to represent this light in the space of the church. They conceived a very low dome and inlaid the slopes of its forty windows with gold and silver mosaics so that they worked as reflectors. At that time many services were held at night, the so-called all-night [vigils], and in the darkness the slanting windowsills reflected the light in such a way that it seemed as if a luminous cloud hung in the dome. This was constantly in motion. The flickering light of moon and stars changed its contours, it seemed alive. The image of the cloud was also an icon, linked with the original Biblical conception of God represented in the form of a shining cloud. The second commandment, 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image', was thus kept. An image was created which was not a depiction. During the day people could see a hundred and fifty polycandela (special flat chandeliers) suspended beneath the dome; they revolved, that is, they created yet another image of spinning light. The endless compositions of natural and artificial light, reflections from the golden mosaics, the marble inlays, the silver liturgical vessels, the altar screen and ambo had tremendous impact on visitors. Let's imagine what Prince Vladimir's emissaries saw in St Sophia's of Constantinople, when a faith for the people of Rus was being chosen. The chronicles tell us that they were amazed: we did not know, they said, whether we were in heaven or on earth, and nowhere have we seen such beauty. Before that they had been in Rome, and could have seen luxurious proto-Romanesque basilicas there. However, it was precisely the Byzantine spatial icon, where the predominant artistic medium was light, which filled them with awe – but it wasn't just the light.

What else was it?

There was also, for example, the medium of scents, which organised the movement of worshippers around the church, and this is another ancient tradition which attracted the attention of researchers only very recently. It was an important means of communication, developed into a refined form in Solomon's Temple on the one hand, and in Roman imperial rituals on the other. Byzantium inherited all this. Movement in ecclesiastical space was brought about in accordance with the intensity and variety of censing, as it was in the ritual space of imperial Rome. Each scent corresponded with its own level of sacredness, and together they – like the light – created a specific dramatic composition. What we see today during an Orthodox liturgy is a pale reflection of this practice. It has become considerably simpler and less deliberate, but one can discern the echoes. Some parts of today's liturgy may be read according to the rules for the composition of contemporary art. For example, at the beginning of the morning liturgy the light of the sun, rising in the east, enters the church through the altar window. Censing is already happening at this point in time, the smoke is swirling and the light falls upon it, and so we see a cloud of light issuing forth from the altar towards to faithful. This action is enchanting, is perceived as a revelation, according with the ancient Hebrew conception of God as a shining cloud, but this same practice unites us also with the performative image of St Sophia of Constantinople. None of the contemporary clergy are reflecting on this, however, as far as I am aware.

Do Byzantine practices share similarities with twentieth century works – with performative creations like the chapel of Mark Rothko or the church of Dan Flavin?

On the level of media, there are lots of similarities. At the start, when I'd say to colleagues that a Byzantine church was set up along the lines of a multimedia installation, they'd express bewilderment and indignation. However, the media principles are precisely the same. If you don't take them into account, the church will be perceived like a museum, and a visitor will behave accordingly:

looking at the pictures on the walls, searching for familiar subjects. The original blueprint for the behaviour of a church visitor was completely different, however. As they enter the church they should feel themselves in the midst of the Heavenly Jerusalem, in a space neither entirely earthly nor entirely heavenly, but in a mediating space. The church exists namely for that. And in order to create an image of the Heavenly Jerusalem, all means of communication were used: architecture, and pictorial images, and the dramaturgy of light, and ritual, and the medium of scents. Therefore, although ancient Byzantine monuments and contemporary art are entirely unconnected historically or symbolically, the media similarities between them are striking. When I talk to contemporary artists about this, they are surprised by the fact that they are unconsciously attempting to repeat something which was created a thousand years ago.

On the other hand, it would be silly to compare contemporary art with St Sophia of Constantinople in terms of quality: it beats almost everything that has been created in the world on every level. This is the objective case, so don't think me a blind fan of Byzantium: it contained such riches, depths, intellectual and spiritual potential, that it is beyond compare. Even contemporary travellers to Istanbul are immensely moved on entering Hagia Sophia, ragged and humiliated as it is. And by the way, I really like the Rothko chapel – one of the most important masterpieces of the twentieth century. One might also recall the work of Bill Viola – in terms of effects, deeply Byzantine in essence. I have had a lot of contact with him and talked, amongst other things, about hierotopy. He was glad to learn about this theory, since he strives towards very similar aims, towards spatial images which cannot be reduced to flat pictures. And precisely because of his devotion to the idea of the sacred, some contemporary curators find him very challenging. Although he comes from the Catholic tradition, Viola has lived a significant portion of his life in Japan; he was greatly struck by Zen Buddhism, and doesn't insist on a strictly Christian interpretation of his works.

On the whole, these Byzantine spatial quests prove far more relevant for contemporary art that the easel paintings of the post-Renaissance period. The majority of artists know nothing about them, however – they are searching in that same direction, but blindly. And a further problem is that although the

direction of multimedia quests is the same, there is no longer any spiritual content.

Is it possible that this is knowledge received through an intermediary? The West, after all, carried off Byzantium during the Fourth Crusade, and the dramaturgy of light in Gothic cathedrals will always be part of the consciousness and worldview of a westerner.

You know, you've brought up an important issue. When I read the notes of Abbot Suger, the founder of the first gothic cathedral in Saint-Denis, I was struck by the fact that he was, it turns out, a leading master of hierotopy. He created a new conception of sacred space, where one felt the presence of heaven on earth. And, do you know what he mentions as a model and source of inspiration? St Sophia's of Constantinople! For me this was, at the time, a revelation. He writes: I asked people who had seen the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and Saint Sophia's of Constantinople, and they confirmed that what I had done was similar. It is wonderful that in conditions of complete external difference, on the level of hierotopical conception there is nevertheless a likeness. Subsequently the whole of Gothic emerged from this environment of light, which Suger dreamed up. It is surprising that no one remembers this today.

Let's return to spatial icons.

They emerge in space like a sort of vision, and differ fundamentally from flat pictures. They may illustrate a concrete text, but simultaneously be full of associations from the most diverse texts. The Byzantines thought that using the image of the Heavenly Jerusalem to illustrate the Apocalypse profaned and impoverished it. They were very wary of simple and obvious meanings, of illustrations. Yet another of my terms, which is also important for contemporary art, is the 'image-paradigm', in other words, an image which fundamentally cannot be reduced to an illustration. It is visual, but nonetheless not illustrative. The Heavenly Jerusalem, which is embodied by the entire

ecclesiastical space, but nowhere depicted, is just such an image. Image-paradigms may also be found in texts. Often Byzantine literature is deemed primitive in comparison with western: allegedly it is inferior to modern literature. To a great extent this is because we simply don't know how to read it. We haven't mastered this sort of communication. We have lost it. And therefore, to put it bluntly, the point of art history today also boils down to locating the text which explains some picture or other.

You have written that the discovery of linear perspective in the Renaissance reshaped the physiology of our vision, and we began to see the world differently. Did Byzantine visual perception really differ so significantly from ours?

I won't embark on a discussion about the physiology of sight, but it seems to me entirely obvious that they saw the world fundamentally differently. Linear perspective was the working tool of a group of artists living in Renaissance Italy. They thought up for themselves, if you like, a toy of sorts – a new tool to help them talk about the world. But later this became a real means of perception: everyone began to see the world with the help of linear perspective. And an educated person, knowing that an object gets smaller in dimensions the further away it is, would approach an icon and understand that it is constructed entirely differently from a fresco by Paolo Uccello. It would seem to him wrongly constructed. At some point a whole series of very intelligent and sensitive people like, for example, Father Pavel Florensky, realised that linear perspective was imposed by western European culture as a way of seeing the world. In attempting to explain that this is incorrect and inappropriate for the ancient icon, they thought up the theory of reverse perspective. This topic was, in its time, very fashionable. However, in my opinion there never was any reverse perspective; Byzantines simply saw differently. And the time has now come to deal with this, enriching not only the history of art, but also contemporary artistic practice.

In other words, icon painters working before the sixteenth century drew the world as they saw it, and subsequently all later authors

perceived it differently, but for some reason they continued to reproduce in icons a picture of the world from the previous age, one which they themselves no longer believed in?

In the sixteenth century there was a reform in icon painting by contemporaries and the artists themselves, as radical as it was unconscious. Icon painters thought that they were following the true Byzantine way of creating holy images, at the point at which they had cardinally changed the Byzantine approach. I am often asked why one can walk through the halls of the Tretyakov Gallery up to the sixteenth century, and then suddenly find oneself in a different world. What happened? The fact of the matter is that the main artistic centre was lost with the fall of Constantinople, and they decided to save its artistic heritage by unifying all systems of drawing. And thus the 'pattern book' for icon painters appeared, a selection of tracings and diagrams which allows the artist to create his work according to these templates. This may seem like something applied. However, this application changed the very principle of Byzantine iconography. In Constantinople, an icon could never be painted according to a diagram, it would be impossible even to think of doing so. We have, for example, the letter of Epiphanius the Wise, about how Theophanes the Greek worked in the Kremlin at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Not only did he not use any sort of iconographic pattern-book, he created radically the new images of the Trinity chapel in the church of the Saviour on Ilin Street in Novgorod, and basically didn't look anywhere, all the images came from his own head. The idea that an icon might not be created, but lifted from an ecclesiastically endorsed book, destroys a foundational principle and turns the icon into a flat picture. It strips away the spatial element. This is easily discerned when we look at efforts to imitate style. It is clear that not a single contemporary artist is able to create something which might be compared with the early fifteenth century Zvenigorod icons, usually ascribed to Andrei Rublev. But imitating the style of Dionisy, who worked a century later, now that is possible. The style of the sixteenth and seventeenth century is easy, and it is very professionally achieved. We've lost the essence of the icon as a spatial image-mediator, but can easily achieve an external resemblance.

So all Byzantine meanings had been lost by the time of Peter the Great, and when he issued his decrees abolishing court rituals based on Byzantine practices, people already had no idea why they were needed?

Yes, they had no idea. Peter also saw a harmful ideological element in them. For example, the famous Palm Sunday 'Procession on the colt' consisted of the Patriarch sitting on a mare which the Russian Tsar led by the bridle, underlining the spiritual superiority of the Patriarch, who embodied the iconic image of the Saviour. This idea evidently irritated Peter. He eradicated all these iconic rituals. The appearance of Orthodox churches radically changed during the same period. Until the seventeenth century they were draped with a huge number of cloths, along the walls, and on the iconostasis. Churches brought to mind the Old Testament tabernacle – a fabric tent. Fabrics were part of the performative action, since they continuously changed according to the days of the liturgical calendar. But during the Petrine era cloths were removed from the churches, leaving behind the naked walls with illustrative pictures that we see today. Few people remember that earlier, the images on venerated icons were practically inaccessible to the gaze. They were covered not only by metal icon covers (*oklady*), but also by a whole system of decoration, which included the most diverse fabrics, and cloths for both above and below the icon. Only a small part of the face of the Vladimir icon of the Mother of God was visible, and at the point at which it was removed from the Kremlin's Dormition Cathedral, this section was covered by five layers of overpainting from different eras. Until these layers were removed, nobody had contemplated her magnificent face. However, a real holy object, covered with a metal icon cover and cloths, was contained in the special wooden case (*kiot*). This represented a particular hierotopical idea: the icon was presented as not just a flat picture, but as a spatial image. The bowing down before an invisible image harks back to the great prototype, when the Jews first in the tabernacle, and then in the Temple of Solomon bowed down before the Ark of the Covenant, not seeing it and not expecting to see it during their lifetime. It dwelt in the Holy of Holies on the

altar of the Lord. The High Priest could approach it and, without looking, sprinkle there the blood of a sacrificed lamb.
However, everyone knew that the Ark was there, and this was really important. Byzantium had its own tradition of unseen icons, which were generally never displayed, for example the ancient icon of the Kykkos Mother of God on Cyprus, or the icon of the Saidnaya Mother of God in Syria – the most venerated Orthodox icon in the Middle East. There are many reproductions of them, you can see copies even on covering veils, but not the icon itself. I was in both the Kykkos Monastery in Cyprus, and before the Saidnaya Mother of God in her monastery, and I have to say that this is a completely unique mystical experience. The whole set up stimulates spiritual-artistic emotions. On Cyprus, a little window has been fashioned in the icon cover, through which an Orthodox pilgrim may – with special permission – venerate the icon and feel its surface with his lips. The rest is obscured by the icon cover and by veils preserved since the thirteenth century (they are now in the monastery's museum). We are used to being able to walk up, take a photo, and by this very process turn a spatial image into a flat little picture. But when you can't see a holy thing, although you know it is there and that you can communicate with it, you genuinely experience deep spiritual emotion.

You've said something about the scraping off and consumption of paint from icons for pious purposes. And Averintsev wrote that the Byzantines washed off and drank the ink from the most venerated books, hoping thereby to achieve wisdom. This sounds mad to a person of today.

The icon was a projection of an image in the heavens, but simultaneously also a wooden board, which you could do anything number of things with: scrape off the paint, burn it, chop it up like any material object. And nevertheless, it constitutes a unified space with an image in the heavens. To our minds this notion is paradoxical – we are used to dividing the material and the spiritual. For a Byzantine, however, this ultimate concreteness and similarly ultimate ideality is very important. So the rational evaluation of these apparently

superstitious practices – like kissing icons, scraping the paint from them and breaking off small pieces – is mistaken. All forms of tactile communication with the holy are part of an overarching perception which we no longer understand. It is not only a wooden board which may be a projection of a heavenly image – a spatial icon may be enormous. For example, the New Jerusalem near Moscow takes up fifty square kilometres, and this is also the spatial icon that Patriarch Nikon saw. In his conception the river Istra became the Jordan, Mount Tabor and the Mount of Olives appeared, and the monastery itself was built as an exact copy of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. A famous artist worked on all this 'land-art'. While Nikon was friends with Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, they were building this spatial icon over the entire territory of Russia, in other words they were creating 'Holy Russia' as a concrete project. In this, artistic endeavours joined forces with macro politics, since the chosen kingdom was born where the second coming will happen, and its people will be the first into the Heavenly Kingdom. In the understanding of people of those times, this was a powerful national idea and a key idologeme, in the name of which much could be achieved. Thus an artistic project acquired universal scope.

And only the political dimension remained in the Greek projects of Catherine the Great?

Yes, the religious meaning was completely subordinated by the political. The recreation of Byzantium engendered by the empress in Crimea was an eighteenth century idea in spirit. Catherine called her grandson Constantine because she was appointing him emperor of Byzantium under the aegis of the Russian Empire. Her elder grandson Alexander, who was named in honour of Alexander the Great, was called to rule a greater Russia, under the wing of which his younger brother would revive the Greek world. This beautiful rational idea was not brought to fruition, unfortunately, but Crimea with its cities was revived. And Crimea also had its own hierotopy, not only in the projects, but also in the construction of churches, although by then it was already illustrative and applied.

Tell us about the tale of French absolute monarchy and Byzantium, and about the reaction of Enlightenment figures to it.

The story is a very simple one. In today's society, the anti-Byzantine myth prevails. The average person knows nothing about Byzantium, and this sort of knowledge doesn't even make it into the cultured repertoire of an intellectual. This fact is particularly significant for Russia, which grew entirely from Byzantium. How has this happened? Medieval travellers to Byzantium were overcome with tears of delight, and with good reason: contemporary Istanbul is a miserable village in comparison with magnificent Tsargrad. Everything ended with the fourth crusade. Having pillaged the Christian capital, Europe developed an enormous guilt complex. The Pope himself called the Latin knights dogs, and excommunicated them. However, an image of Byzantium as a perfidious and ignoble country which needed to be chastised emerged as an excuse. In that case the crusade was justified. The spontaneous discrediting of Byzantium went on for centuries. The conscious formulation of this conception was achieved by the enlightened French. Byzantium itself did not particularly worry them, but they knew a lot about it. Greek language and culture was very fashionable at the time. Louis the Thirteenth translated Byzantine tracts into French. Richelieu, Mazarin, and Colbert collected Greek manuscripts, which subsequently made up a significant part of the collection in the National Library in Paris. The works of Byzantine historians were published. Byzantium was known and loved in seventeenth century France, so we can't say Enlightenment figures slandered her out of ignorance. Their aim was different. It was very difficult to struggle against absolutism and clericalism under conditions of strict censorship: Byzantium was therefore refashioned as a straw man, so that in its guise, the contemporary government might be scourged. This ruse proved unbelievably successful; everyone believed in it. We should remember that at this time Voltaire and Montesquieu were the absolute leaders of contemporary thought – they were read all over Europe. The Russian empress corresponded with Voltaire, discussed the Greek project with him, the philosopher approved of her idea and gave her advice on how to restore the Byzantine empire. And at the same time, in different works, he called that same empire 'dreadful and

tasteless' (that very Byzantium!). Montesquieu described it in even harsher terms: in Byzantium there was nothing except the vacant veneration of icons. And so arose the myth of terrible eastern despotism, embodying universal evil. The word 'Byzantine' became an insult in almost all European languages. The empire remained strange, luxurious and alien, and Orthodox countries which have grown from its heritage are considered to be entirely corrupted by it. The sugar-coated myth of Byzantium, where everything was perfect, is a response to this anti-Byzantine myth, and it became a model for Russian autocracy. And here we, as historians, should point out that there is a great gulf between the Byzantine emperors and the Russian tsars. In the Greek world, the emperor is the protector of the people. We, however, are accustomed to envisaging a leader as a dictator, established by the ruling class in order to keep the people down. The Byzantine emperor saw himself as a representative of the poor before the ruling classes. This is evident from decrees and can be demonstrated by documentary evidence. This mythologeme existed in the consciousness of the Russian people too – just not in the consciousness of their rulers.

You say that we have forgotten and lost everything. But what actually remains?

An 'iconic consciousness' remains. We have inherited from Byzantium our perception of the world as an icon, that is as an image-mediator. My favourite explanatory example comes from nineteenth century literature. Let's consider how the image of the world in the works of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy differs from that which we see in the literature of their French contemporaries. The French dissect what is before them, and apart from that given materiality, nothing exists for them. But for Russian authors, the object of their description is not the final reality. The pathos of our authors lies in the fact that this world is only an image-mediator, and beyond this is another. They do not strive to describe it, but a different layer of reality is present in everything they say. This tradition is preserved by both Mikhail Bulgakov and, of course, Andrei Tarkovsky. His films are permeated by the iconic idea. There is no connection with the medieval period in 'Mirror', but in the slow motion shot of the milk spilling across the

table we see an image which is calling us to another reality – and this is the fundamental principle of his artistic work. In my opinion, the brightest and most talented works of Russian culture are intrinsically linked with a Byzantine perception of the world. Perhaps neither Tolstoy nor Dostoevsky thought about it, but this heritage is preserved on a different level, and it is precisely this which creates the enigma and allure of Russian culture for Europeans, which makes us interesting to the world.

Is there anyone amongst our contemporaries who might be included amongst such heirs of Byzantium?

Our contemporaries create nothing more than pastiche. One might compare Hagia Sophia, where today there are no liturgies, and the neo-Byzantine Church of Christ the Saviour, and I am not talking about the contemporary replica here, but the original built by the architect Ton, a work of great professionalism. The first church is an image of God, but the second is an image of omnipotent Authority, the Russian imperial idea. That's exactly what we get from Byzantium today. There are, however, a few icon-painters who are re-creating spiritual meaning rather than making imitations and replicas. Irina Zaron is currently the best of them, I think. That said, it seems to me that the most talented artists are actually wary of working with this tradition, afraid that they will turn out a 'Church of Christ the Saviour'. And because of the monstrously low level of knowledge, the Byzantine idea hasn't been harnessed at the level of state ideology either. Successful mass political propaganda requires at least a few clichés, and there aren't any – just complete ignorance. The authorities are currently trying to push the sugar-coated myth, but won't manage to do so until there is some study of Byzantium, even on the most primitive level, like that, say, of Indian yoga, or the Japanese tea ceremony. Even in the nineteenth century, when the level of knowledge was considerably higher, when the authorities spent a great deal of money to consolidate the neo-Byzantine style together with great artists like Vasnetsov and Nestorov, when a huge number of churches was built in Byzantine style, it was a failure. It was soulless. Although no one manages to harness such a delicate Byzantium, it nonetheless remains an enormous part of our psyche, our way of perceiving the world, which

differs from the way Westerners see things. This shouldn't be translated into a crude distinction – they are all about money, we're all about the spiritual – that would be wrong. But we all sense major and often unarticulated differences. Some people consider these a hangover from Tsarist-Soviet savagery, which should be rooted out, learning from civilized peoples. However, this history is, in fact, considerably older and more complicated. And we have still not moved on at all from this false, nineteenth century conflict. The American historian Arnold Toynbee, for example, cited our Byzantine roots in analysing the roots of the Cold War, maintaining that the Byzantine empire is the historic enemy of the West, and all problems stem from the fact that Rus received the eastern variant of Christianity from Constantinople. And so, he maintains, we are on the verge of nuclear war because Russia followed two-faced Byzantium rather than the right-thinking West. This sounds rather silly, but a lot of people hold similar ideas, even educated people. I think that the only way to overcome this vicious circle is to recognise that Byzantium is a fundamental branch of European culture. Our Byzantine branch, like the Western one, also united ancient heritage and Christian values, but in a different fashion. We are 'Byzantine Europeans', and in this construction both words are important. And from that position one can actually begin a dialogue.