



Photo: From the Archives of the Monastery of Kazan (Moisenay) and Natalia Zelenina (Fontainebleau).

EARS TO HEAR, EYES TO SEE

## Orthodox Architecture and the Avant-Garde:

Russian Church in Moisenay, France

**Valery Baidin**

Translated by Vera Winn

There is an unshakable and almost unanimous opinion among contemporary Russian church architects that the development of Russian church architecture came to an end in 1917, after reaching its peak during the art nouveau era. It is a common belief that this development had stopped, firmly and “provisionally,” and therefore that any further innovations should be discarded as suspicious. The “bright future” of church architecture was in its past. In fact, this retrospective utopianism indicates indifference and a lack of creativity.

For a true artist, the “golden age” is always in the present. This is evident if we look at the development of Russian Orthodox church architecture outside Russia. Often the work of small groups

with limited means, Orthodox churches built in other lands demonstrate a persistent search for answers to the diverse challenges of the twentieth century. They reflect the development of Church culture, define approaches to new construction technologies, and articulate new visions for Orthodox architecture.

This article analyzes one of the first and—in my opinion—most successful instances of church architecture adopting the aesthetics of the avant-garde, a structure which should be of interest to architects and historians of Russian architecture. The Church of Our Lady of Kazan in Moisenay, sixty kilometers southwest of Paris, is one of the most striking examples of Orthodox church architecture of the second half of the twentieth century. This is not only be-

cause it contains frescoes by Fr. Gregory Krug and an iconostasis and icons painted by Sister Joanna Reitlinger. The design of the building is unique and represents a rare synthesis of modernist aesthetics with the Russian Orthodox tradition. The history of this church is itself astonishing and almost hagiographic. It took two decades to build and was essentially a one-man feat.

<sup>1</sup> *Skete*: An Eastern Orthodox monastic community typically smaller than a full-size monastery and combining hermetic lifestyle with communal services. – *Ed.*

The author of the project and the builder of the church was the founder of a monastery in Moisenay, Archimandrite Euthymius (1894, Russia–1973, France, secular name Grigori Alexandrovich Wendt). Little is known about this extraordinary man. He was born in Sergiev Posad, Russia, graduated from high school with honors, showed great ability in mathematics, and studied at the Moscow Higher School of Engineering, where he received a degree in mechanical engineering. In the Civil War, he fought on the side of the White Army with the rank of lieutenant. In 1920, he left Russia and, until 1925, was assigned to the Alekseevsky Regiment in Czechoslovakia. He completed further studies at the Polytechnic Institute in Prague and at St. Sergius Theological Institute in Paris. In 1932, he became a monk, in 1935 was ordained a hieromonk, and in 1938 founded a women's skete in the village of Moisenay.<sup>1</sup>

For a long time, the tiny monastery church occupied the basement of a private house. Then Fr. Euthymius created an architectural plan for the stone church building and, in 1955, despite the obvious lack of funds and materials—and not yet having received a building permit—he started its construction. His neighbors allowed him to collect stones from their fields. He would load these stones in the wheelbarrow, bring them to the construction site, knead a concrete solution, and build the church walls. After a while,

his few friends and some students from the Theological Institute in Paris began to help him. It is not surprising that the construction of the church took about fifteen years, until 1969. Before the church was completed, however, Fr. Euthymius invited Russian Orthodox iconographer Gregory Krug, who, using the blueprints and instructions of the abbot, created frescoes and several icons during the years 1964–1966. More icons, and the iconostasis by Sister Joanna—with carvings by the nun Hilaria—were brought to the newly built church from the old one.

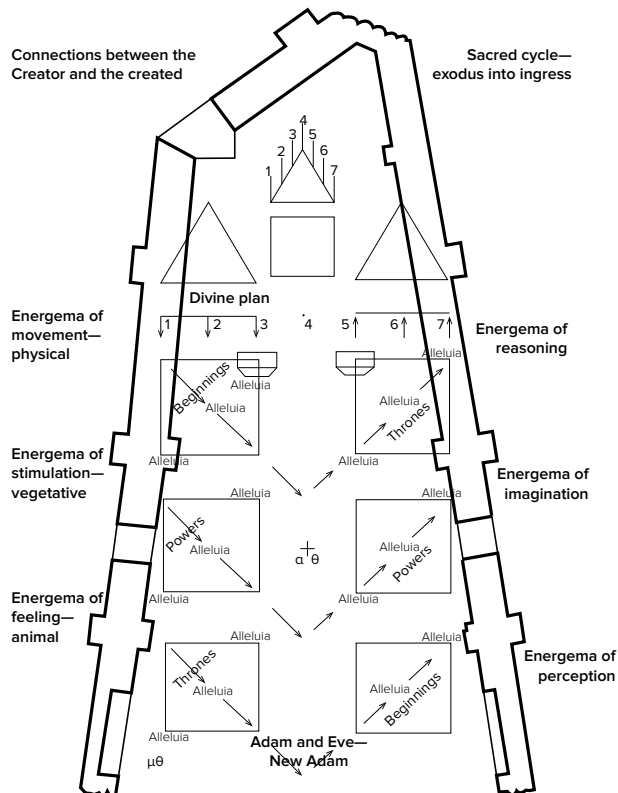


What is so special about architecture of the Moisenay church? Its appearance was defined during design when Fr. Euthymius—a mathematician, a theologian, and a disciple of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov—set out to convey the principle of “metaphysical architectonics,” the Trinitarian nature of God, and the idea of creative “Sophianic” energies, using the symbolism of geometric forms. Even the plan of this church, an elongated irregular trapezoid, does not look traditional. The altar is oriented to the southeast and is placed between the acute and obtuse angles of the lower sloping side. Two side walls form a single-nave interior which extends to the western wall, which is set at an angle to the central axis.

The church is crowned with a bulbous cupola and a round drum topped with the familiar three-barred cross, but the rest of the building is far from traditional. It is an intricate compound volume with oblique and slightly upwardlyconverging side walls. The sides of the gable roof have unequal curvature. The angle of inclination of the transverse south wall is steeper than the northern wall. The roof rises sharply from the altar to the quadrangle vault,

with symmetrical upper edges that are reminiscent of geometrized *zakomary*.<sup>2</sup> However, the *chetverik* (quadrilateral structure) is chamfered by the sloping ceiling, and on the entrance side it leans directly to the wall.<sup>3</sup> Because of this, from the west the church looks like a belfry. The only entrance to the church passes through the open porch with roof peak, rectangular doorway, and symmetrical diamond-shaped windows on the sides. Two exterior stairs on the right and left lead directly to the choir. The walls are concrete lined on the bottom with local stone, recalling the fortifications of Northern Russian monasteries. Above, they are plastered evenly and not whitewashed. This treatment emphasizes the contrast between their vertical planes, which are inclined at different angles. The play of textures on the church roof is equally conspicuous: above the altar the roof is made from smooth pieces of silver tin and in another place from old roofing iron. The top part of the roof and the attic are covered with a platform of ribbed sheets of black iron. Geometrically, this section aligns the roof and brings it to the proper quadrangle vault. All of these surfaces are separated along their edges by decorative ribs. The hipped roof of the quadrangle vault is also covered with white tinplate, and the tin-plated onion dome is crowned with an eight-pointed cross of the same color. A smaller cross stands over the altar, directly above a ceiling fresco of the Holy Trinity. It is cast from concrete and is similar to the four-pointed Greek cross.

Despite the paucity of available means of expression, Fr. Euthymius was able to create the effect of a variety of architectural forms, their complex rhythmic unity and intense dynamics conveying the idea of “invincibility,” of “spiritual armor.” The architectural image of the church symbolizes a spiritual stronghold and expresses the idea of “the as-



cent of the soul,” from the altar to the dome and into heaven. The whole image of the building is composed of broken and in some places overlapping planes of different inclinations, shapes, colors, and textures. It is accentuated by pilasters that turn into buttresses with two rectangular windows in austere platbands that cut through the top of rough exterior walls, as if they “see through.” These are complemented by four triangular dormers on the roof slopes and a narrow altar window in a small corner oriel.

In subsequent years, the appearance of the church has been heavily distorted by alterations, and many details disappeared. The roof was completely leveled and covered with black slate tiles. A baroque golden cupola was added. But the feeling of “spiritual ascent” has not vanished.

Floor plan of the church after Euthymius Wendt.

<sup>2</sup> *Zakomary* : In Russian church architecture, a semicircular expression of the end of the vault on the building façade.

<sup>3</sup> *Chetverik*: A quadrilateral building structure common to traditional Russian architecture. *Chetverik na vos'merike* would describe a four-sided volume atop an eight-sided one.

The interior of the church is consistent with its external forms. It is noteworthy that in accordance with the plan of the architect, there are no right angles except for the contours of the two side windows. This creates a sense of the temple's otherworldliness, its unlikeness to conventions of earthly construction. The internal space was created in accordance with the laws of reverse perspective. It unfolds from the elevated altar, the diverging walls, the steps to the soleas, and the rising ceiling. These lines of emanation of "Sophianic" energies determine the external architecture of the church. The plastic expression greatly increases in the sanctuary, where one's eyes encounter sharp corners, protruding edges, a slanted and irregular ceiling. The polygonal space here is an architectural metaphor of the cave—an early Christian crypt into which descends the Divine Spirit embodied in Christ, and where the "mental hell" explodes and the mystery of resurrection occurs (it should be noted that the image of the cave is also evoked by the local stone which lines the outside walls up to the top of the altar).

In accordance with the medieval tradition, an icon is placed on the sill of the little altar window. Stylized pilasters inside the church are covered with traditional images of saints, but the left and right pilasters in front of the altar are decorated with frescoes of the enthroned Virgin Mary and Sophia, the Wisdom of God, who are not only "mystical pillars" but also *creators* of the Universal Church. The pilasters on the sides correspond to the ones inside, but instead of the usual five pilasters there are seven: three on each side and one at the apse. On the concrete walls, these pilasters obviously serve a purely symbolic function. They convey a "sophiological" idea of this church in particular and the temple building in general that

was very important for Fr. Euthymius: "Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven pillars" (Prov. 9:1).

The choir on the gallery above the entrance to the church is the image of the heavenly world, which is ascended to by the angelic hosts depicted in front of it on the walls. The view from the gallery offers a different, higher perspective on the spiritual world of the interior and a view of the external, earthly world through the windows. The space under the dome rises up like a "heavenly well," emphasizing the general feeling of ascension. The lighting of the church also has symbolic meaning. Together with the light of the skies, the uncreated light of the Holy Trinity flows through the triangular dormers into the sanctuary, while visible, physical light streams into the nave through the windows in its walls and the choir loft. It should be added that Fr. Euthymius, who had a fine ear for music, managed to create excellent acoustics in his church.

The church in Moisenay was the first concrete structure in the history of Orthodox church architecture in Europe. This new construction technology responded well to Fr. Euthymius's desire to realize his "mathematical-architectural" and mystical theology by means of spatial geometry. In an expansive manuscript, whose Russian title translates as "Decisions of the Anchorite and Their Drawings and Naming: Graphics and Grammar of the Dogma," Fr. Euthymius articulates his sophiological theory of church architecture.<sup>4</sup> The word *anchorite* is of Greek origin and means one who has retired from the world—like the author himself, who was a monk, and like the church architecture that, in his view, should be detached from all earthly things. According to the author's *scholia*,<sup>5</sup> this book explains the main principle of church

<sup>4</sup> Euthymius Wendt, "Начертание и наречение решений отрешенного. Графика и грамматика догмата," (author's typewritten manuscript, Moisenay, 1969–1972).

<sup>5</sup> *Scholia* (from the ancient Greek σχόλιον, "comment, interpretation") are grammatical, critical, or explanatory comments, either original or extracted from preexisting commentaries, which are inserted as marginal glosses on manuscript of an ancient author.

<sup>6</sup> Wendt, 383.

<sup>7</sup> In Christian theology, *kenosis* (Greek κένωσις, "emptiness") is the "emptying" of one's own will and becoming entirely receptive to God's divine will.

<sup>8</sup> Wendt, 358.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from the Russian edition of Alexander Schmemmann's *Journals, Дневники 1973–1983* (Moscow: Russkiy Put, 2007), 35.

architecture: "God manifests Himself in restriction."<sup>6</sup> Hence his idea of "sacred architectonics" through *kenosis*.<sup>7</sup> The structure of the church building should reveal the Divine energies embodied in architecture. *Kenosis* is the concept in the theology of the Incarnation that describes the diminution or "reduction" of the Divinity, or, in the words of Fr. Euthymius, "the loss that has saved us."<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote: "This church that was built by Fr. Euthymius almost on his own, is amazing. First reaction, 'I wish I could serve here!' Truly this is a church-epiphany."<sup>9</sup>



Mystical interpretations aside, the church looks like a Cubo-Futurist structure, with its asymmetrical massing and oblique angles in plan. In this respect it is similar to the three-dimensional compositions of Boris Koryolov or the fantastic "churches" of Zhivskulptarch built between 1919 and 1920.<sup>10</sup> This impression is not accidental, as Fr. Euthymius's theoretical writings demonstrate that he was familiar with the aesthetic heritage of the Russian avant-garde.

"Decisions of the Anchorite," an extremely complex theological and philosophical treatise, reflects the author's somewhat surprising interest in the prominent representatives of Russian modernism, such as Alexei Remizov and particularly Velimir Khlebnikov. In his words, Velimir Khlebnikov "invented broken neologisms and abstruse contractions [*contrs*] in which he saw the highest meaning of the Russian language or universal human language."<sup>11</sup>

Fr. Euthymius's own book is full of Khlebnikov-like neologisms: in addition to the florid title, there are am-

biguous words such as *ideoimage*, *willoglory*, *essensowordness*, *centreheartness*, *fevburn of Love*, *sootastness*, *underlay*, *popud*, *underprop*, *heav*, *roumble*, *deadess*, *immetwn*, *inspeeched*, *marknoted*, *capavolumed*, *centable*, and *lifaliveable*.<sup>12</sup>

Like Khlebnikov, Fr. Euthymius often rearranged the sounds or syllables in a word, or of words (*metathesis*), and so did Fr. Euthymius when he created his own numerous "*contrs*" or "letterial transformations."

He regarded this act of *metathesis* as a special sacrament and used it not only to transform ordinary words such "winner-wine" ("воин-вино"), "carma-arch-cancer" ("карма-арка-пака"), and "mirk's karma" ("карма мпака"), but also to the divine names: "The Lady-Veda (*Deva-Veda*) is perceived in the highest... She is Wisdom herself."<sup>13</sup> Fr. Euthymius even dared to use expression "Metathesis of the Father of all."<sup>14</sup>

For Fr. Euthymius, the creation of words was a special "Path of the Fishing Net of the Word," and his attitude to language was rooted in modernist aesthetics: "Remizov's ligatures—literature. Khlebnikov's abstrusity—poetry. It's a Real Language! In any case we vouch that the true Khlebful Remiz

<sup>10</sup> A creative group of Soviet architects in the era of 1919–1920 who worked toward a synthesis of art, sculpture, and architecture in development of a new avant-garde architectural style.

<sup>11</sup> Preface to vol. 2, 2.

<sup>12</sup> "умыслообраз," "волеславие," "сущесловие," "средец," "гар любви," "опоть," "подолжь," "попудь," "подста-та," "тяж," "опибель," "мертья," "вновлен," "вьязычен," "метный," "емный," "стотный," "жизни-мый."



is a return of the Language to the Entrustment of the Revelation.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, language that exists “at the mercy of Grace” sharply contrasts with the “language of dialectical materialists,” atheists and materialists of the word.<sup>16</sup> This is why a divinely inspired creator “starts from a creakness [начинает от худа],” but “produces... marvelous and spiritoartory [чудожество и духожество].”<sup>17</sup> Such linguistic formations resonate with Khlebnikov’s “internal declension of words” (“glory—denigration” [слава—умаления], “word—prayer,” [слово—умоление], “strength—tenderness” [сила—умиление]) and “glossological hallelujahs” (“alioui—Yiwu, alioui—aloi, uy, laoi”), and also “abstruseness” (“abstruseness of the music in language and language in music”).<sup>18</sup>

In a note to Fr. Boris Bobrinsky about the second volume, Fr. Euthymius half-jokingly called himself a “futurist”: “I received a book of poems by Velimir Khlebnikov from bibliophile A. P. Struve through Mother Blandina [A.V. Obolensky]. In it Khlebnikov mentioned his linguistic theories. I would love to see it and compare it with mine! I think that after the additional 200 pages, I will be attacked as both a sophiologist and a futurist.”<sup>19</sup>

People who knew the author well took this self-identification quite seriously. For example, Abbot Gennady (Eykalovich) saw in Fr. Euthymius’s writings “a reflection of bizarre futuristic trends” and a “game with phonosemantic elements.” He claimed that the creator of the church in Moisenay “not only knew Khlebnikov’s ‘philosophy of abstruseness,’ but also shared it.”<sup>20</sup> In one of his letters in response, Fr. Euthymius wrote: “I am the engineer who invented the first drawing of the skies... I blew up the norms of the Greco-Roman grammar.”<sup>21</sup>

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No wonder Fr. Euthymius decided to “blow up the norms” of traditional church architecture. In an appendix to the second volume of *Decisions*, entitled “History of the Construction of the Church,” he confesses that the decision to build such an unusual church was like a mystical insight that came from an angel, and that the image of the entire construction was predetermined by the irregular plot of land with obliquely truncated sides and an old stone wall bending inward. At the location of the wall, Fr. Euthymius saw the altar of the future church. Based on this starting point, the construction, “went on at the dictation of the plan” and “according to the necessary deduction.” Fr. Euthymius wrote that the “hyperbolism of both slopes of the roof,” its “convexity” and at the same time “concavity of the ceiling,” the absence of the dome and lack of “prettiness” so familiar to the Orthodox eye were all suggested by this plot of land. Not wishing to explain the true “Sophian” significance of the church to anyone, Fr. Euthymius good-naturedly compared it to the “smoothing-iron” and agreed that it was “ugly,” “bizarre,” and “pecking at the ground.”<sup>22</sup> At the same time, however, he stated that it was precisely “the *energema* of God and the Name that is included in the volume of the church... that made demands to its visual... serviceability”—in other words, to its architecture. As he claimed: “The moment of vision precedes the moment of knowledge.”<sup>23</sup> Long before he wrote his treatise, Fr. Euthymius had envisioned a “detached” image of a “sophianic,” unearthly, abstract church, built from concrete and stone. In this sense, the creation of Fr. Euthymius should be considered avant-garde.

It would be wrong to consider the church in Moisenay as a mere curiosity, the fantasy of a lonely, self-taught

<sup>13</sup> Wendt, 295, 376–377, 277.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 372.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 368–378.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 297.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 321.

<sup>18</sup> Wendt, 369; Appendix to Volume 2, 65; 455.

<sup>19</sup> Euthymius Wendt to Boris Bobrinsky, October 17, 1971. Archive of the Pokrovsky monastery, Bussy, France.

<sup>20</sup> Abbot Gennady (Eykalovich), “Extended Hieroglyph in memory of Archimandrite Euthymius Wendt.” *Vestnik RSHD*, 107:1 (1973): 100–103.

<sup>21</sup> Gennady, 94.

<sup>22</sup> Wendt, 50–52.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 59.



architect. Even though Fr. Euthymius's life and legacy are poorly researched and no proof of his conscious adoption of architectural avant-garde techniques exists, the unusual design of his church is highly consistent with the avant-garde approach: "metaphysics" rather than a "game"; a definitive rejection of tradition; creative freedom; mystical vision; and conceptuality. The style of the church building should not be attributed directly to specific trends in twentieth-century architecture. It is, rather, a personal realization of various architectural ideas from the Middle Ages to Russian Constructivism. This is why Fr. Euthymius called himself a "constructor" and even referred to the Divine "All-construction." He wrote about the "architectonics" of ideas and "armatures" of visual images.<sup>24</sup> Like Konstantin Melnikov, he worked outside of styles, following his own "system" of views. The aesthetic essence of this system was architectural rationalism, understood as austerity of thought and form. To paraphrase the architect and educator Nikolai Ladovsky, the church building was for Fr. Euthymius a space formed by the Holy Spirit.

Archimandrite Euthymius openly declared his "acute rejection of all world views which were shaped as a result of learning rather than by vision." He undoubtedly built his church in line with his treatise, which he started writing "more than thirty-three years ago"—that is, immediately after the founding of the skete in 1938, and independent

of any architectural authority of the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> According to eye-witnesses (including Vladimir Lenzi and Fr. Michail Fortunato), the architectural plan of the church was created soon after World War II, long before the construction of Le Corbusier's famous Catholic Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut (1950–1954), which overturned traditional ideas of religious architecture. In "The History of the Construction of the Church," Fr. Euthymius states: "The construction of the church began twenty years after the foundation of the Kazan Skete because of the institution of prayer and its own life, whose edict is not of this world. Day by day... this wise... Ordinate of Worship... caused a thirst of sublime Church-creation."<sup>26</sup> Undoubtedly, the founder of the Church of the Kazan Mother of God believed that church building was the highest form of human creative activity. For him, it was a mystical unification with the Creator and a sophianic participation in God's creativity: "I have built a temple, and the temple became me, and my face became the Temple."<sup>27</sup>

In Russian Orthodox church architecture, Moisenay remains an exception, a shining example of creative personalism. It was created in the cultural context of the Russian-European avant-garde, whose artistic experiments were profoundly re-thought, as the modernist "game of forms" was replaced by a mystical vision and by a theological sermon expressed in the language of sacred arts. ✱

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 329–330.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 87–96.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 162.



**Valery Baidin** is a writer, philologist, and historian of Russian culture. He studied history at Moscow State University and continued his studies in Switzerland and France. He has taught at the University of Nancy and at the Sorbonne. In 2011, he participated in the architectural debate over the construction of a Russian cultural center in Paris. He is author of numerous scholarly articles and essays on Russian artistic culture and a number of works of prose and poetry. He lives in France and Russia.